

THE ARGOSY.

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THE MYSTERY OF ALLAN GRALE.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WEBSTER'S HAMMER.

DR. PALMER and his daughter Agnes were walking along in silence in the summer twilight, after the séance held at Moorland House when Miss Bessie Tempest had played "Medium."

"Papa, I don't believe a word of it," cried Agnes, her pent-up feeling at length bursting forth. "It was all a wicked cheat from beginning to end."

"Hush, child!" said the Doctor, soberly.

"The Medium, as she calls herself, is a vain, deceitful woman; just that, and nothing more," continued Agnes.

"She is a most hysterical-looking subject, I admit," returned Dr. Palmer.

"Do you believe she was unconscious, papa, when she pretended to be?" pursued the girl, with fine scorn. "I don't. Why, I saw the lead she followed in nearly every word she said!"

"Ah," said the Doctor, "while the rest of us were lost in her cleverness, you were quietly observing. Tell me what you noticed."

He had a great respect for female observation in social matters, saying that from the beginning the whole sex had been chiefly employed in watching the ways of the world, so that it must have almost developed a new sense.

"She took up what poor Mrs. Grale let drop about the Black Pool, though she chose to speak of it poetically, as 'the dark water,'" returned Agnes. "And when once she got a hint about Allan, she described his picture as it hangs in the room where we took off our bonnets. Lady Laura could have told her whose portrait it was. For that matter, Lady Laura may have coached her up beforehand."

"Lady Laura would be sure to say 'No' to that," said the Doctor, a peculiar smile upon his lips.

"Papa, I believe all that scene with poor Mrs. Grale was pure acting. Miss Tempest must have known there had been a disappearance—trouble of some sort—and she manipulated the word 'play' very carefully. There was nothing at all in the individual messages. They could be made to fit most circumstances and most people."

"There was one thing which struck me in her remarks to George Vivian," said the Doctor, thoughtfully, "and that was the way in which she dwelt upon his many happy years to come. Any sharp observer who wanted to make true prophecies would beware of doing that. I don't like George's looks—or his cough."

"Perhaps she wanted to please him, and so promised what she thought he was longing for," persisted the sceptical girl. "And the flattery she gave everybody else was positively sickening. While she was dwelling on the trials of Lady Laura, I could not help imagining a sheriff's officer smoking a long clay pipe and sipping ale in her ladyship's back hall!"

Agnes might have started had she known that her own errant imagination had hit the exact truth. That sheriff's officer sat just so till the following Monday, when Lady Laura's Sunday's letter to Mr. Grale brought an answer, with an enclosure; after which, the sheriff's officer departed.

"But there was something strange about her sudden mention of Edgar Vivian's name," said the Doctor, in a low tone of reluctance.

"When I can see an explanation for everything else, I am sure there must be an explanation for that also. It was a wicked, wicked trick, done to satisfy people's malice and suspicion, and done in a safe way, which cannot be challenged. I should have liked to make her tell what she meant, to order her 'spirits' to speak plainly or not to speak at all," continued Agnes, vehemently. "These Mediums, or whatever they call themselves, should be held responsible for what 'comes through them,' as their cant expresses it."

"My dear girl," said the Doctor, mildly, "we must be very cool and patient in the elucidation of unknown or obscure facts."

"To be sure," returned Agnes. "We must be cool and patient in chemistry and anatomy; but it is not being cool and patient to try experiments of blowing up our own houses, or plunging knives into our own friends. But, papa, what did you mean just now by saying you do not like George Vivian's looks—or his cough?"

"I mean just that, Agnes. I think he looks ill, and I think that little, hacking cough of his may mean worse than it sounds to ordinary ears. George has never been strong, you know."

"You should take him in hand, papa. Ask him to let you."

"I did ask him," said the Doctor. "That is, I hinted at it."

"And what did he say?"

"Laughed at me; and said there was not anything the matter with him. I never found a young man yet who thought there was, until he grew too bad to fight against it any longer."

George Vivian having walked quickly on with Lettice, paused to say good night at the top of their little lane leading to Dr. Palmer's house. The Doctor did not invite him in. On the contrary, he bade him hasten home, for a heavy dew was threatening.

Charles Carr and Mark Acland were waiting supper for them. The young men had spent a pleasant evening together. They had wandered out into the woods and remained there long after sunset; and their faces and their minds were still fresh with the sweet breezes and the "hearty counsel" held with one another. Charles was eager for news of the party at Moorland House, and the two girls related it. The young chemist and embryo doctor were much amused.

"If the spirits could have given a hint who that man was who came to our shop, if he was not Allan Grale, it would have been some satisfaction to me," said Mark. "As for dragging the Black Pool, of course it should be done. Don't you think so, sir?"

Dr. Palmer did not answer. Charles spoke.

"Only—I suppose—if they don't find anything in it, they will be almost more uneasy now than if they do."

"But," dissented Mark Acland, "it is one thing to be uneasy over the truth, and it's another to be pestered by a fancy. Truth can always be endured."

Mark was somewhat of a philosopher in his way. And it seemed to Agnes that if she had wanted an oracle, she would far sooner have accepted the chance opinions of the two young men, bright and healthy from their woodland ramble, than the "inspirations" of hysterical Miss Bessie Tempest, with her flabby furbelows, and her faint perfumes. And yet, for all Agnes Palmer's scepticism and contempt, the words spoken by Bessie Tempest haunted her and kept her wakeful half through the night.

The next day was Sunday, a sweet summer Sunday. In those lovely Dering lanes, with the sunbeams glancing through the over-arching trees, and the cleanly cheerful groups of villagers wending their way from snug mossed cottages to the white church gleaming on the green hill-side, it seemed hard to believe in the existence of sin and suffering, deception and crookedness. There was strength in the sweet solemnity of the worship, there was soothing in the simple melody of the hymn. Agnes, like all people of healthy nature, yielded herself to healthy influences the moment they touched her; and the pain in her spirit settled into a mere blank, a want of something which ought to have been there—an emptiness like that of the Court pew in Dering Church, for not one of the Vivians appeared at Divine service to-day.

On Monday morning Mark Acland was to return to Sladford. He had made arrangements with his master, the doctor, not to be expected before noon. This would give him time to walk over to Carstow, after breakfast at Dr. Palmer's. Charles was to accompany him so far, that they might both see Charles's new invention safely off by the

main line train which was to take it to a manufacturer in the midland counties ; who, through Mr. Grale's intervention, had consented to give it practical trial.

As the two young men entered the parlour, Lettice, already busy at the breakfast table, looked up to speak.

"The post is in, Charles, and the scanty correspondence is all for you." Many people in Dering, including Dr. Palmer, did not have their letters delivered on a Sunday morning.

"I expect you will have a note from Webster, acknowledging the receipt of the hammer and graciously pardoning your ungracious delay," observed Mark, laughingly, as he took his seat.

There were only two missives—a letter, and a yellow railway notice. The first did not look particularly interesting, whereas there is always some excitement about a possible parcel, so Charlie opened the circular first. Of course it gave no particulars, except that a prepaid parcel was awaiting him at Dering Station. Briefly announcing this, and leaving Lettice and Agnes to exclaim and conjecture, he turned to his letter.

"Webster's hand-writing," commented Mark, looking at the envelope the other threw aside.

"Well, to be sure!" exclaimed Charles. "Is there to be no end of bewitchment about this implement? The parcel now waiting for me at the station contains the very hammer I sent to Webster last week. He returns it, because he says his own was duly sent to him last autumn! It was sent to his old address at Sladford, and was forwarded to him thence."

"Who sent it?" cried Mark.

"He adds," said Charles, reading on, "'It had been sent to Sladford by the post, at which I wondered, as its weight made the postage heavy, and there was no note either enclosed or accompanying it, which I also thought strange. Probably you will understand how the mistake was made, and I am sorry that you should have had the trouble of buying and sending a new one.'"

"Now, what can we make out of that, sir?" asked Charles, addressing the Doctor, who had entered the room while he was reading the letter.

The Doctor sat down. "You absolutely cannot recall when you last saw the hammer?" he enquired. "But I remember you have already said you cannot. Who knew that you had borrowed the hammer?"

"Oh, several people knew that. The clerks in the counting-house at the Works knew it; and Allan Grale knew it; and—and Edgar Vivian also," concluded Charles, with reluctant hesitation.

"Well," broke in Agnes, almost passionately. "Why do you shrink from saying that Edgar Vivian knew? What could be more natural?"

Her father put his hand gently on her shoulder. She drew herself

away, but not fractiously. Each must bear his own burden, and there is some sympathy which can scarcely exist except as pity, and so is painful.

"I beg your pardon, papa," she said, quite humbly.

"Edgar Vivian knew of it in this way," said Charles. "He walked in from Carstow station with me the day that I first got the hammer. I showed it to him, and told him it was lent to me through Mark Acland."

"'Webster, Sladford,' was printed on the handle," observed Mark. "You say you took that for the maker's name," he added, looking at Charles. "But Mr. Edgar Vivian would probably know Webster's shop: he was often at Sladford for the cricket-matches."

"Well, I don't see that we can make anything out of the matter," said Dr. Palmer. "But I suppose, under all the circumstances, we had better let Mr. Grale know about this."

"And then Mr. Webster can send up his hammer to let Miss Bessie Tempest impart guesses about it, and thereby cover herself with honour and glory," cried Agnes, speaking bitterly.

Half an hour later, as Mark Acland was on his way to the station, Charles accompanying him, they met a cart, containing some men, strangers to Dering, and a quantity of curious gear. One of the men touched his hat to Mark.

"Why, they must have come in from Sladford!" he exclaimed. "They are the lock-keeper and some watermen belonging to Sladford canal."

Leaving Charles on the footpath, Mark went up to the cart and spoke with the lock-keeper. The young fellow's face looked grave as he returned to his friend.

"Mr. Grale lost no time," he remarked. "He despatched a special messenger to Sladford on Saturday night."

"But what for?—what are the men going to do?" asked Charles Carr.

"They are come to Dering to drag the Black Pool."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE BLACK POOL GIVES UP ITS SECRET.

BEFORE that day was out, Dr. Palmer was fetched to the Court in hot haste, to attend a new patient there.

It was George Vivian himself.

Years before George had had a serious lung attack, of the kind which, by its suddenness and the unmistakable gravity of its manifestations, sometimes alarms the patient into a valetudinarian existence, and generally conveys a warning so solemn as to command more or less attention. George for some time had been more or less under the

hands of the medical men, of Dr. Palmer in particular ; he had been debarred from many pleasures that other youths and young men enjoy ; of balls, and severe gymnastics, and public speaking ; but he had his consolations in frequent change of air and scene, and a life of elegant leisure. And as the years went on, he had become so apparently strong, that perhaps nobody remembered the old fears, except Dr. Palmer, or that the past grave attack might sometime be renewed.

But the attack had come. It had come quite suddenly, when nobody was looking for it, least of all George himself, and the Doctor was summoned to Dering Court in haste. And George, as well as Dr. Palmer, knew that what, happening once might be but an accident, happening twice meant the shadow of the end.

Maria was in devoted attendance on her brother, and Dr. Palmer was not sorry to think that her confinement in his sick room might for the present spare her all knowledge of what was going on at the Black Pool. He also hoped another thing : that the cold words, the surmises and suspicions being whispered abroad of Edgar Vivian, would not reach her ears abruptly.

How far had such suspicion and surmise any foundation ? And would this horrible quest be fruitless ? Dr. Palmer could not silence these inner questions.

In the evening, when he was on his way to pay a second visit to the Court, he turned out of his road to go and take a look at the watermen at their work.

The work of dragging the Black Pool, deep in bottom and densely weedy at its sides, might not be effectually completed in less than two or three days. But the watermen's first hours of toil had not gone quite unrewarded. Mr. Grale, grimly watching their labours, had turned half angrily from the old tin vessels and faded rags which they had brought up for his gaze. But just before Dr. Palmer had arrived on the scene, they had secured a very different prize. It did not look unlike the other useless débris which had no significance whatever. It was only a man's hat ; and the watery bed it had had for months made its appearance exactly as if it had been the discarded head-gear of some tramp or gipsy. The watermen judged it to be such, as they lifted it up, and shook off the heavy moist weeds which enveloped it. Mr. Grale, anxiously watching from the opposite bank, thought little else. But when he saw the men turn it round and look inside it, and look again, and then look at each other, he felt that they had come upon something at last, and he went forward eagerly to meet them as they carried it towards him.

There was no mistake about it. Sorely stained and soiled as it was, on the white silk lining of the hat there remained distinctly visible the name of " Allan Grale."

The rough watermen stood awkwardly round the stern old father. Whatever emotion might stir him inwardly gave no outward sign, unless indeed it lay in the absolute silence in which he, after a moment, waved

them back to their work. Even when Dr. Palmer came up, he said nothing ; he only pointed to the hat ; and when the Doctor saw it he realized by the revulsion of disappointment, how strongly he himself had hoped and believed that the Black Pool had no secret to surrender.

The Doctor could not bear to see his old neighbour sitting there, in that terrible silence, watching the troubled waters which could not hold their own much longer. He would have liked to bid him go home and entrust the awful surveillance to some one else. But he knew Mr. Grale was not a man to brook any such interference. So he went round the margin of the Pool to have a little conversation with the men. He knew the Sladford lock-keeper, and meant to suggest to him that they should suspend their labours for that evening, for Mr. Grale's sake.

The men paused as he approached. They had a reason of their own for so doing, apart from civility.

"This is terrible work, Jenkins," said the Doctor to the lock-keeper.

"Aye, sir," responded Jenkins, wiping his brow. "And I am glad you are come up, sir. That there old gentleman should not be allowed to stay here."

"Who can make him go?" returned Dr. Palmer.

Jenkins shook his head. "I reckon we've got hold of something just this minute, Dr. Palmer, sir," he said, in a whisper. "It may not be got to the surface for a good while, or it may come almost directly. Being medical, you don't need to be told, sir, that things which have lain long in the water are an awful sight."

Dr. Palmer nodded. But what could he do? "Can you not say, Jenkins, that you are going to leave off in a few minutes,—and then I may get him to walk to the high road with me. Perhaps you really are?"

"Aye, sir," said Jenkins, "it may be in no time. For if it does not come up easy like, we shall leave it till to-morrow."

Nothing but the inducement given, that the men "were just going to take up their grappling irons and leave off," could have persuaded Mr. Grale to quit his post. Dr. Palmer linked his arm within his, and led him away. He had tied that battered hat in his bandana handkerchief, and carried it in his hand, as in his hard-working and penniless boyhood he had perhaps carried his little all.

"Mrs. Grale must not see that," said the Doctor.

"I'll leave it at the lodge," he replied. "Poor Polly! Perhaps it's only right I should go home to her." Yet he paused on the edge of the high road, and looked back. "I ought to return later," he said, "and make sure that all is quiet."

"I'll do that on my way home from the Court," answered the Doctor, hastily. "And then I'll look in upon you at Moorland House."

So they parted. But Dr. Palmer turned and turned again to see that Mr. Grale had not again changed his mind. No, the manufacturer with his ominous burden went steadily forward. How bent and old he looked! How he had changed in the last day or two! In the distance he might have been taken for an aged labourer returning from a day's toil. And, perhaps there was not one such in all England with a heart so heavy as his.

The Doctor hurried to the Court, where he made his visit as short as possible. George Vivian was no worse; he was decidedly as well as could be expected, and felt no alarm. Nay, the most troublesome symptom about him was his anxiety for a speedy recovery. Though forbidden to speak in any tone above a whisper, he had distressed Maria by telling her that he must make arrangements for getting mountain air as soon as possible—nothing would do him good like mountain air. Maria, in agony, had besought him to remember that much movement or exertion was absolutely forbidden him. He had only smiled; and to her dismay, had persisted in writing a letter; which he charged her to see was put into the post-bag.

"It was directed to Mrs. McOrist, at Ragan, Ross-shire," said Maria, dropping a few tears as she disclosed this to Dr. Palmer. "That was the farm to which George took so great a fancy when he and Allan Grale visited it last Autumn. He has made up his mind that a long stay there would quite set him up. But it must be much colder there than here—and what a frightfully long journey it would be for one in his condition!"

"Well, he cannot go yet," observed Dr. Palmer. "We may safely leave it an open question, for the present. If he does go, later, you would have to accompany him. You need change and mountain air almost as much as he does."

"I don't know what my poor Uncle would do without us," sighed Maria. "The Court seems under a dreadful cloud just now!" she added, raising her pathetic eyes to the Doctor's. He almost started. How true her last words were! Yet he felt she spoke them without any special meaning. How long would she remain in blessed ignorance of the dark doubts whispered about Edgar?"

"There, there," he said kindly, "I must not keep you longer out of your brother's room, or he may be attempting to arrange his chairs and tables by way of wholesome exercise. Don't you oppose his whims and fancies when laying out his plans for the future, Miss Vivian: rather appear to fall in with them."

Dr. Palmer hastened back to the Black Pool. It was not twilight yet, but the sunshine was out of the atmosphere, leaving it cool and gray. Not a voice fell on the Doctor's ear as he approached the Pool. Had the men really left their task, disappointed in their latest find, or unable to secure it until the morrow. He hurried on.

No. They were still at their task. But they were no longer at work. They were gathered around something which lay on the

grass at their feet. It was a terrible something in the guise of a man. When they saw Dr. Palmer coming they stood a little apart, but nobody uttered a word until he spoke.

“Thank heaven that we got Mr. Grale away !”

“Mr. Grale, though he is his father, couldn’t have known him—or anybody else, either,” spoke the lock-keeper, hoarsely. “But I expect there’ll be marks, or linen, or something for identification.”

“Ah, there can be little doubt,” sighed Dr. Palmer. “Why, there’s the light over-coat which he had with him : we all knew that coat well. It’s strange ; it’s very strange.”

Dr. Palmer was thinking of his own story about the man on the Carstow Road ; the one he had seen that night from his patient’s window, and whom he had certainly taken for Allan Grale. He must have been mistaken, after all. “This is the way that ghost tales grow,” he thought, with the half-conscious habit of a mind trained to trace cause into effect.

“Can you tell me, sir, what we are to do with it ?” asked the lock-keeper. “We have our litter for the removal ; but where is it to be taken to ?”

At first Dr. Palmer could not answer the question. It would never do to take it to Moorland House.

“The smith has a lock-fast out-building behind his smithy,” he said after reflection. “I am sure he will not refuse it to us. His place is quite near. I will go on and speak to him ; and afterwards do my best in breaking the news to Mr. Grale.”

The little procession was soon formed. The watermen had their hand-litter and their tarpaulins, and carried the poor human salvage with a homely reverence. The smith and his wife were instantly at Dr. Palmer’s service. The good woman hurried into the outhouse with her sheets and pillows, thinking to make decent preparation for the dead. But the Doctor sent her away ; the sight was too dreadful for any unnecessary eyes. He and its bearers disposed it as creditably as possible—even thankful that the light was waning dim !

“Did he drown hisself, I wonder,” said the smith in an awe-struck whisper.

“I think the skull is stove in,” observed the lock-keeper. “But that might have happened after death, you know.”

“These will be questions for the post-mortem,” interposed Dr. Palmer.

“Begging your pardon, sir,” said the experienced lock-keeper, “but before you go to Mr. Grale, had you not better look at the linen marks, and into the pockets ? Relations are often suspicious, and there’s many a dead man who has shaken a living man’s character.”

Dr. Palmer took the hint, but his inquisition was brief and rapid. There were two or three shillings and some copper money in one of the pockets, a lead pencil, a sheet of a sporting newspaper, and a handkerchief marked in ink “A. G.”

"That will suffice," he said. "Any further examination will do afterwards."

They drew a white sheet gently over the awful thing. And they hung another to screen the dusky window of the outhouse. And then they all came out, and the Doctor made fast the door and took away the key in his own pocket.

And in less than an hour there was wild weeping in Moorland House, and a messenger was speeding across the country to apprise the coroner of the need for his services; while the Dering villagers ran in and out of each other's cottages and made public property of any confidences which might have been privately exchanged during the last few weeks.

Only Mr. Grale sat, pale and silent. He had not been sorry when he first thought that Allan had gone away. But Allan could never come back now.

The father shed not a tear. He had not a word: except once.

Mrs. Grale cried out that she and her sister Marget were two miserable women. "Those live who would be better dead," she wailed. "And those die who should live!"

"Poor Polly!" said her husband. That was all. But there was something in the tone which touched some recollection in the mother's mind. She was not comforted: she was not soothed: she was not called from her grief to console his. But her moans grew more gentle.

The coroner's inquest was held in the village school-house, where the rooms were large and suitably furnished with benches. The children were enjoying a week's holiday, which left the place at liberty.

As to the identification of the remains, the jurymen themselves had known Allan Grale, and they testified to their recognition of him. They could see all that could be seen—that the dead man was of Allan's height and build—that he had the familiar light-brown curly hair; and of the hand which had not been clenched in the death agony, the little finger had a slight crook, a little congenital peculiarity which Allan had inherited from his mother. But more special evidence was forthcoming.

The father's came first. He said he believed the body was that of his son Allan. He had not seen him since October last. Had not been alarmed at his disappearance at first, believing he had wished to absent himself from home for a short time. Had afterwards heard reports of his being in Scotland, and had grown very angry about the matter. Latterly he had grown to feel alarmed at the prolonged absence, and at the total lack of any news.

One of the maids from Moorland House—Susan—was next called to testify to certain points. She identified (as others had already done) the light overcoat, which Mr. Allan had taken with him the

evening he left; and she could swear to a miniature dressing-case found in one of the pockets of the coat. She could not speak so positively as to the ordinary tweed suit which was shown her, but she knew Mr. Allan had had two or more suits of similar appearance. She could not identify the handkerchief, despite its initials, neither the under-clothing. She said with some hesitancy that these were not so fine as Mr. Allan's, nor could she remember that he had had any mended as they were. She was in the habit of looking through the Moorland House linen as it went to and came from the laundry. She had often found articles which she did not recognise as Mr. Allan's, but which she found afterwards he had bought on emergencies during his travels, or else had been changed at hotels for his own in the washing.

Susan went on, in answer to questions, to say that she was one of the last people who had seen her young master. He had left home on the twentieth of last October. That same afternoon, Mr. Edgar Vivian had called; but on being told (by herself) that Mr. Allan was gone out, he had written a note in pencil in the hall, which she had carried up to Mr. Allan's room, and placed on his table. When Mr. Allan came home to dinner that evening, he went up to his room and no doubt saw the note. It was after dinner, soon after it, that he finally left. Mr. Allan had dined alone that evening, the rest of the family not being at home. Further, the witness said that Mr. Allan Grale generally wore his watch—always, indeed, so far as she knew. Also his signet ring. But the signet ring had been found on his dressing-table. Possibly he had omitted to replace it on his finger after washing his hands for dinner.

No watch had been found on the body: hence these questions to Susan.

Mr. Edgar Vivian was next called. He came forward looking very pale and with a constrainedly calm manner.

He remembered calling at Moorland House. The servant just examined told him Mr. Allan Grale was out: she thought he had gone to Dr. Palmer's, to take something to Charles Carr. He saw the carriage driving away with the ladies in it as he came in sight of the house. He wrote a short note in pencil to young Mr. Grale, asking him to meet him on the morrow at the Black Pool. He could not say whether he had dated the note. Probably not.

These words were listened to amid breathless silence. Edgar Vivian spoke them in a low, clear voice.

He went on to say that he had not received any answer to his note. But he had gone to the Black Pool the next day. Allan Grale did not appear, did not keep the appointment. He had wished for a conversation with him on business. The business was of a private nature. Two or three days afterwards, he received a letter which he had believed came from Allan. It requested that a small box, which Allan had put in his charge, should be sent to Scotland, to a certain

address, given. He complied with the request at once and sent off the box.

Upon being asked by the coroner whether he could produce that letter, the witness replied that he was very sorry to say he could not. The letter had in some way disappeared ; he believed that he must, himself, have torn it up by mistake.

That was all. The coroner, in curt words and tone, told the witness he might go. And as Edgar Vivian turned and faced the little assembly, he believed he knew how Cain had felt when he met the first eyes which saw the mysterious brand of murder on his brow.

The next person called was the yellow woman, Jane West, very much to the surprise of the assemblage. She came forward, trim and self-possessed, and attired in deep and handsome mourning. The yellow cloak was folded across her arm : she had put it off to appear before the coroner.

After all, she had not any evidence to give that was of much account, only that on the twentieth day of last October, in the evening, she had met Mr. Allan Grale, whom she knew well by sight, near the Black Pool. He appeared to be walking to it. She had noticed him particularly. She thought at the time that he looked a little different from what he usually did look, and remarked to herself that it was because he was wearing a light great-coat, which she herself had not before seen him in. Yes, it was similar to that coat, now produced. Could be quite certain of the date—the twentieth of October.

Two or three more unimportant witnesses were examined, and then came the medical testimony ; that of Dr. Palmer and Mr. Holmes of Sladford. They said that the body had been in the water for some months, which prevented a very particular examination ; but they testified that there was an injury to the head, sufficient to have caused death, inflicted by some small, heavy instrument. It must have been a rather peculiar instrument, Mr. Holmes said ; and he could imagine no possibility of such an injury having been received after the immersion of the body. It could not have been self inflicted.

The audience listened breathlessly ; despite sundry sinister rumours, the opinion of many had constantly reverted to suicide.

In answer to further inquiries, the Doctor said that after such a lapse of time it was almost impossible to speak positively on any point, but appearances did not indicate death by drowning.

Thus it appeared, if the opinion of the two medical men was correct—and there could be no reason to doubt it—that poor Allan Grale had neither destroyed himself nor died by drowning. His life had been taken from him by the violent hand of some adversary.

And in the heart of nearly everybody present, there arose one name—that of Edgar Vivian.

The coroner summed up, and the jury retired to the infant school-room to consider their verdict—where chromos of elephants and lambs on the walls looked down upon them as they debated. Nothing but

an open verdict could be returned. Suspicion might lie more or less on Edgar Vivian, but there was no evidence, as yet, brought forward against him. They carried in the following verdict :

"We find that the deceased is Allan Grale ; and that he met his death by violence at the hands of some person or persons unknown."

"That will do, gentlemen," said the coroner, briskly. "If any more evidence should turn up, as perhaps it may, further proceedings can then be taken."

The court broke up, and the audience poured out of the close room into the summer sunshine. Mr. Grale hurried off to Moorland House, accompanied by a strange gentleman who had been present and was understood to be his lawyer, and by Dr. Palmer.

But one curious incident came out at the inquest, which has not been yet told.

In the right-hand trouser pocket of the dead man, amidst the two or three shillings lying there, was found the spade guinea lost by General Vivian. This was an extraordinary thing, quite unexplainable.

Had the guinea fallen accidentally from the General's watch chain on the road, and had Allan Grale picked it up? If so, why did he not restore it to the family? Had he forgotten to do so, and been murdered before he remembered it?

"I never thought it was so bad as this," cried the poor stricken-down father as he entered his house with the lawyer and Dr. Palmer, and they shut themselves into a room together. "What has he done, my poor boy, that he should be barbarously murdered?"

It was a question that could not be answered.

Another question, lying in abeyance and doubt, was with what instrument had the fatal injury been inflicted? A little conversation had taken place upon this point in the inquest room ; and it was now especially exercising the mind of Dr. Palmer.

He was asking himself whether it could have been the watchmaker's hammer.

The probability was, he thought, that the small parcel which Allan had carried out with him on that afternoon, intending to take it to Charles Carr, must have contained that mysterious hammer. Had the unfortunate young man had it still in his possession in the evening, and had it been used against him? He mentioned this to Mr. Grale.

The lawyer said something about further investigation into the crime, and a trial, but he was interrupted by Mr. Grale.

"I don't want a trial," cried the fierce old man, with flashing eyes. "Let the man escape. But let him understand that we know he is a murderer. That can be done in a thousand ways against which he will not dare to contend."

"I think the people to-day made him conscious of their feeling on the matter," observed the lawyer, who had completely adopted the

suspicion against Edgar Vivian. "Probably he will soon feel himself driven out of the neighbourhood."

"Into exile," snarled Mr. Grale. "Well, that will do. To my mind, there's more satisfaction in that than there is in capital punishment. Let his conscience be his punishment."

A day or two later, and then the poor dead body, which the miserable mother was not allowed to see, was duly deposited in the Dering graveyard, in the very centre of the little plateau which was railed off as "the Grale ground." And the Lady Laura Bond, who had asked leave to attend the funeral, "to support her dear friend, Mrs. Grale," brought masses of flowers to heap upon the coffin. She also brought Viscount Rockford and Lord Pelerin.

"Mary Anne Grale will be enormously rich now; there's only herself left to inherit," she had remarked to these two choice young men.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MORNA'S MARRIAGE.

"I KNEW it! I knew it! You know I knew it all the time!" had been Maria Vivian's first and only exclamation when she was told that the body of her old lover had been drawn from the dark waters of the Black Pool. She had accepted all the anguish, whatever it was, long ago, and the final discovery seemed to make it no more real to her than it had been before. She listened even to the conjectures and suggestions concerning its manner with a strange, benumbed absent-mindedness. It seemed as if she had her own convictions concerning that, too, and that they were of a kind not to be easily disturbed by aught which might appear to contradict them.

But Maria was entirely unacquainted with the suspicions cast on her brother Edgar.

Dering Court was certainly a very sad place in those days. With all George Vivian's feverish anxiety for recovery—perhaps because of it—he did not make real progress. If one day he felt well enough to take a few gentle turns on the terrace, the next day found him obliged to own that he was too weak to lift a foot.

Still George's mind dwelt constantly on a journey to the far North. A day never passed without his descanting on the beauties of such a life as he might enjoy for months on the farm at Ragan. He must be able to start off there soon, so as to lay in a stock of strength and vitality during the remaining months of summer and autumn. And really, he said, if he derived the benefit of which he felt certain, he thought he would be wise to remain there through the winter. Many medical men held that a severe yet dry and bright climate was beneficial to such a case as his. Dering winters were inclined to be so damp and dull. The snows at Ragan would suit him far better.

"But think of the comforts that you can have in such a home as this!" urged Maria, the tears starting to her eyes with pain at his restless longing to be elsewhere.

"Comforts!" echoed George. "You have little idea of the comfort of a house built as houses are where cold weather lasts long. Ragan is of stone; its walls are twice as thick as these. Peat smoulders on the hearths day and night, and there is health and healing in its very savour. I am not an invalid, to need reclining chairs and so forth," added George, ignoring the fact that he lay helplessly among his sofa cushions as he spoke.

"Oh, George!"

"Well, I shan't be when I'm a bit stronger—and that will be soon."

Maria yielded the point. Alas, she was only too much afraid that the Fates were on her side, and that all the projects could never get beyond wishes!

"But would the family be able to accommodate us both for so long a time?" she enquired. "These good people may cramp themselves to receive strangers during the summer months, but they like to have their homes in peace for the winter."

"Why!" exclaimed George, "I should never think of taking you there. The life would not suit you at all, Maria."

"How do you know that?"

"You would want your poor people and your books. You could not amuse yourself for weeks with a sketch block, as I can. What will be repose for me, would be an unbearable tedium for you."

"I can enjoy any sort of quiet life, I think, George," answered Maria. "How could we bear to have you so far away from us here, and alone? Who would nurse—?"

"I don't want care or nursing," interrupted George, pettishly. "That is just what I shall not want, once I am there. A man never gets out of his invalidism till he gets rid of his nurses."

Maria turned away her head with a sigh. "I know how tiresome it must be to you, George, to have to be guarded and watched—"

Again he interrupted her fretfully. He seldom got through a conversation about that longed-for journey to Ragan without relapsing into a state of nervous irritation which Maria feared originated in his consciousness of how very remote its chances were. She could not imagine why he should so desire it—unless a craze had seized upon him, as it sometimes does on invalids.

George sometimes received letters bearing the Ragan postmark. Once Maria, noticing the good, manly handwriting of the address, enquired of her brother who his correspondent was, and he replied "Colin Vass." Maria had already heard George talk of him. Indeed, when he first returned from Scotland after the visit to it with Allan Grale, he had talked much and openly of the McOrist family.

Latterly he had grown more reticent. But to-day he seemed to be

in a communicative humour. He told Maria that he was quite expected at Ragan, that everybody there was ready to receive him ; and he went on to speak of sundry changes which had taken place upon the farm.

“ Only fancy, Maria,” he said : “ the daughter of the house, Morna McOrist, is actually married. That last news was a surprise to me. She was one of those girls whom one does not altogether expect will marry.

“ But was she not pretty,” returned Maria, who felt sure she had heard so.

“ Ah, was she not !” said George, with enthusiasm. “ She was beautiful. But, to me, she seemed more like a spirit than a girl. I have found it hard to think of her in any of the ordinary ways of life ; and yet, after all, this marriage of hers seems to have been quite a commonplace affair.”

“ Is she well-educated and lady-like ?” enquired Maria.

“ Are spirits—angels—well-educated and lady-like ?” retorted George, with something very like scorn. “ The question sounds hardly queerer in that connection than in connection with Morna McOrist. You are terribly limited, Maria. You have lived so much among china teacups, and set flower-beds, that you must have your doubts of mountain springs, and moorland gorse and heather.”

Maria would not allow herself to think that he spoke unkindly. But she did think of the pain it would be if words like these should recur to her memory, when George was no longer there to speak otherwise.

He went on. “ It is hard to realise that Morna McOrist is changed into Mrs. Smith ——”

“ Is she ?” interrupted Maria. “ Mrs. Smith !”

“ Mrs. Smith ; just that. So they tell me. It seems the old father and mother were not altogether satisfied with the marriage. But I doubt if any marriage would have satisfied them for Morna. However, she had her own way, as I suspect she generally could have with them. I wonder how the cousin, Colin Vass, likes it !”

“ Do you think he would particularly dislike it ?” asked Maria, in a meaning tone.

George laughed. “ Well, I have an idea of the sort, though I believe that personally he regarded Morna as he might a tutelary angel, or an exalted fairy. For the rest of it, the young man has lived awhile outside his native glen ; he has been to College, and has enlightened, modern ideas, and so is far less likely than the old people to be prejudiced against a stranger, because he is a stranger. I need scarcely say, Maria, that this Mr. Smith is one, since I daresay you perceive it is not an old Highland name !”

Maria smiled dimly, thankful for any sparkle of George’s former playfulness. “ Did he go there a stranger ?” she asked.

“ I infer so,” replied George. “ And I fancy he must have been up

there for some months. What he is, or who he is, I know not. One thing I expect would plead strongly in his favour,—that he is not going to take Morna away from the Glen. The father and mother would hardly have survived that."

"Has he taken a house there?"

"Of all the snug, common-place arrangements," went on George, still laughing, "which one could never have imagined in connection with such a girl, this last is the chief! Mr. and Mrs. Smith have taken the management, or are to take it, of the local hotel! It is only about one mile from Ragan itself."

"Well," said Maria. It seemed to her a very natural and commendable state of things for a small farmer's daughter and a respectable young man from the South. "Then Mr. Smith cannot be a gentleman," said Maria, quickly.

"No; unless he is a reduced one. Fellows do all kinds of things when the pocket fails. It is impossible to picture a girl of the refined nature of Morna McOrist 'taking up,' as our servants say, with any man not a gentleman."

"After all, George, she is only a farmer's daughter."

"True. But—well you cannot understand what an incongruity it would be unless you knew her. This Mr. Smith had been staying at the hotel for some time when the landlord was laid prostrate by a sudden and severe illness, likely to be protracted if not permanent. The young Englishman, as Colin tells me, undertook, entirely out of good feeling and kindliness, the management of the house; and Morna, out of the same good feeling, came up from Ragan to assist the landlady with her duties, so as to set her partly free to nurse her sick husband. A few weeks of such close acquaintance stands as good as months of slighter intimacy, you know: and that's how the affair sprung up between Morna and Mr. Smith."

"Does Colin say what part of England Mr. Smith comes from—or what his position has been?" questioned Maria.

"Not a word. Apparently Mr. Smith does not say it himself. They call him 'reserved.' Possibly he may have had his dark and foolish days of some sort, or he may have suffered through others. I can quite understand Morna's love going forth most strongly to anybody who needed an almost celestial pity and help. They say he seems devoted to her: but that nevertheless all the joy of the union seems on her side."

"Does Colin Vass write all this to you, George?"

"He, or some of the others."

It passed through Maria's mind that these Ragan people must be surely very good correspondents for elderly Scotch folk of even the most superior farming class. And how singular it was that they should write so freely to a comparative stranger, as George must be, of the affairs of their own daughter.

"Is it the mother who writes all these particulars to you?" she asked.

"Oh, no," replied George. A slight constraint seemed to settle on him as he added: "Somebody I know is staying in—in the neighbourhood; that's how I get my chief news."

Maria looked up with a vivid interest now. Her face asked the question she did not utter, and George replied to her glance.

"Nobody you know, Maria. It is somebody with whom I made acquaintance at Redbourne."

"Oh," said Maria. "Is he an artist?"

"An artist, yes," replied George, briefly.

"What is his name?" asked Maria, innocently.

"They are called Forester," said George.

"They!" echoed Maria. "Are there two? Is it a brother and sister?"

"It is a man and wife," answered George.

"Forester?—Forester? I seem to have heard that name before," remarked Maria; but unable at the moment to recall how and where she had heard it. "Are they an old married couple, George? Have they any children?"

"No. An infant was born to Mrs. Forester prematurely: too prematurely to live. And now, Maria, I think I must rest a bit; I am tired," said George, turning his face away from her to bury it in the sofa pillow.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"C A I N."

So life at Dering Court settled down for days and weeks under conditions which would have once seemed to Maria Vivian unendurable; but which, like much which seems so prospectively, she now endured very patiently, little hopeful of any change for the better.

The relations between the family at Moorland House and Lady Laura Bond had grown very intimate indeed. Her ladyship was constantly paying visits to Mrs. Grale, listening with so much patience and sympathy to her garrulous narratives about her own young life and her "sister Marget," that the bereaved woman did not restrain the last drop of bitterness in her lamentation over poor Alny's sad end, but candidly bewailed that, after all her housewifely care and motherly pride, her boy had been done to death in a patched shirt, and carrying a common sixpenny handkerchief!

"One ought not to have an unkind thought of the dead," she sobbed, "least of all, of those that are taken as he was; but it does seem hard that he had not more regard for the pains and trouble I always took—and there's two dozen beautiful shirts left to waste now, and I could not count the handkerchiefs!"

"Very sad!" murmured Lady Laura, softly wiping her eyes.

"Oh, it is! But if you'll believe it, Lady Laura," went on the poor mother, "I daren't speak out these feelings of mine to Mary Anne. She likes everything nice, I can tell you, but she has always had it found ready to her hand without taking thought or trouble for it herself. And a proper pride and interest in these things seems sordid to her."

"Mary Anne is young. And the young cannot be expected to feel as we do, my dear lady."

Mrs. Grale sighed. She had confided everything—nearly everything—and how different that is!—to Lady Laura. She told her it was she who had discovered that a box had been sent to Corrabuin, directed to Allan, after he had disappeared. She confided, with many tears, how she had been too easily satisfied concerning his safety by the removal of that box, little dreaming that it had returned to his father's hands. She did not tell Lady Laura what was in that box—indeed she could not do so—but she did not tell her that she did not know; that even since the inquest she had asked her husband once, in vain, and had reasons of her own for not repeating the question. No, all of that she kept secret, speaking of that box as if its interest lay only in Edgar Vivian's anxiety to get it off his own hands. Concerning Edgar, Mrs. Grale gave no uncertain sound. He had killed her Alny; of course he had: man might never be able to prove and punish the treacherous deed, but it would be proved and punished, for all that. Nobody should hinder her from having her say. What mattered now? Her boy was killed among them, and they might take away all her money, or put her in prison if they liked for saying so.

Cautioned as much by her father's ominous self-restraint as by his direct warning, Mary Anne was more guarded in her words. But this very reticence only gave emphasis to her silences, her sighs, and her actions. In truth she was believing that she must give up her dreams of George Vivian's ever becoming her lover. If what they whispered about Edgar was true, that would debar it. It seemed as good as an old ballad—a romantic episode which rarely had had place in life. A crime had been committed and a sister must be sacrificed! Apart from that, it was understood that George's life would probably be a very short one; that he might die before the General; in which case Edgar would be heir to the Court. But—were criminals, though undetected, allowed by law to succeed? Meanwhile Viscount Rockford called frequently at Moorland House, and was very attentive to her, and sympathising. But perhaps he meant nothing—men were so puzzling.

In the midst of genuine grief for her brother's fate, thoughts like these were often agitating Mary Anne Grale's breast, and issuing in many fantastic and inconsistent words and deeds. A rather dramatic depression would give way to a very natural fit of gaiety when the

Viscount appeared on the scene, yet would return very prettily during the interview. Mary Anne was beginning to believe that the Viscount really liked her ; that he would probably ask her to be his wife : and she told herself that she should never care for him as she had cared for George Vivian. But Lord Rockford did not possess George Vivian's attractions.

There were two people in Dering who felt ready, in those days, to wonder at and blame their own gladness in such a world of woe. And those two were Charlie Carr and Lettice Palmer. For Charles's invention had proved an undoubted success, and his way to competency and even fortune was made clear, so that Lettice wore a betrothal ring without disguise. It was very early days yet ; still they had dared 'o begin to think of marriage. Charles had been offered a good appointment in a manufacturing town, upon which he might enter in the autumn ; and why need he go alone, to encounter the discomfort and loneliness of temporary lodgings, when he might have a dear little wife to help him lay the foundations of a permanent home ?

They wanted to fight their own battle, those two young people ; they felt so strong and brave in their pure young love. The money which Charles had received for his invention would enable him to furnish a modest little house, " quite as much as I am equal to manage," remarked Lettice. And the bride would take nothing from home except a sensible trousseau, and an abundant supply of household naperies, for she chose to follow the fashion of former days, which assigned that duty to the bride. Upon true hearts, in their joy, the woe of others strikes a very sharp blow. Lettice felt as if she could for ever ask pardon of her sister Agnes, for being so happy when she was so sad. If Agnes would have said a word—if she would have wept—if she would have broken down in any way, it would not have been so dreadful ! But to see her going about, with her cold, still face, was almost more than Lettice could bear.

Their father did not conceal from them a fact which came to his knowledge very soon after the inquest. It was indeed a fact of his seeking out. He knew he could trust his daughters' discretion and silence, and somehow he felt as if he could not bear to withhold from Agnes aught concerning the mystery which he knew lay day and night upon her heart. Besides, it was not a secret he alone could keep. Others had to know of it. He himself had to tell it to Mr. Grale. Better that Agnes should hear it, told sadly in her own home, than that it should start up, any day, like a snake on some unlikely byeway.

It concerned that instrument which had been so strangely returned to Webster, the watchmaker, by some person unknown.

Directly after the inquest, Dr. Palmer had written to ask Webster to send the hammer to him. Webster sent it willingly enough, with a note, in which he said it had not been used since it was returned to him the previous year. Dr. Palmer caused the hammer to be submit-

ted to chemical investigation, which showed that there was blood upon it. Mr. Holmes, of Sladford, examining the hammer with Dr. Palmer, agreed with him that it was just the instrument likely to have inflicted the wound which the dead man received; in fact, they both believed this self-same instrument had been the one to inflict it.

Mr. Grale's lawyer was for bringing Edgar Vivian to trial. He thought much of this additional presumptive evidence.

"It is not sufficient," dissented the doctors, who were not so ready to rush into law as the other was. "If a man gets tried upon insufficient evidence, and is acquitted, he can't be tried again, you know," said they.

One day Miss Vivian took a short railway journey for the purpose of giving instructions concerning some little special article she wished to present to Charles and Lettice as a wedding gift. It was the first time she had gone out of Dering since the passing of the events told of; and she had to own to herself that the change of scene, unexciting though it was, the fresh fields and hedgerows, the unaccustomed faces and streets in the country town to which she resorted, seemed very refreshing. As she settled herself in the railway carriage for the return journey, she was aware of a strange faint reassertion of her old calm and cheerfulness. She did not resent this, as stormier natures often do. She said to herself that nature will in time clothe the harshest precipices with softest moss and fairest flowers; that nature will heal the wounded limb so that it is once more fit to encounter work and weariness; she might have gone on to reflect that nature will re-vitalise the broken spirit, so that it again becomes conscious of balms, or blows. And then she might have proceeded to ask herself which way the next blow would fall. Instead of that, in her newly re-stirred interest in life, she took up a newspaper which some previous passenger had left behind him.

It was a society journal. Maria read what was to be the new fashion in bonnets; and how the Duchess of X— had had her portrait painted as a jockey; and that the heir to the Earldom of Y— was going to marry the heiress of a City merchant's fortune. Then her eye wandered on to a longer paragraph in closer type. It was headed "The Midland Mystery," and it ran thus :

"We understand that our sensational novelists might make a fortune out of the rumours and romances attaching to this singular tragedy. It is even whispered in legal and detective circles that a trial for murder may be looked for, which will contain all the true elements of a cause célèbre. Whether this prove true or not, there is no doubt that local fame—or infamy—points an unwavering finger of accusation towards the popular scion of an old and respected county family. The latest report is that the instrument by which the unfortunate young man, Allan Grale, met his death, has been found with his blood still upon it, and that the links connecting it with the hand of his assassin are neither few nor far between."

The paper fell from Maria's hand. By instinct, as it seemed, the truth flashed on her mind—that the "scion" pointed at was Edgar Vivian.

That some trivial surmises and doubts had been whispered by the foolish village gossips, as to the appointed meeting (or non-meeting) of Edgar and Allan at the Black Pool, Maria knew. But that suspicion could seriously attach itself to her brother, she had never dreamed.

"It is not true," she said to herself aloud, in the empty carriage. "These newspaper men make paragraphs of what they know nothing! Our Dering people really suspect Edgar? Never! I don't think they could even believe it of him if he were found guilty: for they know he never could be guilty."

So lost in thought was Maria, that when the train began to draw up in the Dering station, she scarcely noticed it, until a porter's voice, speaking the family name, caught her ear. He was repeating sundry instructions to a fellow porter concerning some boxes of choice fruit.

"I tell you it is. Mr. Vivian gave the order when he was down here this morning."

"Mr. Vivian?" echoed the other. "I didn't think he was well enough to be going about."

"I don't mean Mr. George," said the porter, testily; "I mean Cain."

Maria stepped, white and breathless upon the platform. The newspaper men were right then! Was this all the faith which her race had earned by generations of honourable men and women?—by years of genial kindness? Oh, how base people could be! What a cruel world it was! She stood still one moment, and then her mind was made up.

She started off, at a rate which seemed strangely inconsistent with her fragile figure and worn face. As she went, she muttered to herself mechanically:

"The plain truth!—the plain truth!"

She never paused, even to take breath, till she stood before the Grale Works. She had hardly voice to ask for the master, and the startled office boy, astonished at seeing Miss Vivian, ushered her into the counting-house.

The clerks were gone, and Mr. Grale was there alone. But Maria would scarcely have noticed whether that was so or not.

A strange, stony hardness settled on the manufacturer's face when he saw who it was that had invaded his privacy. He rose; but he did not offer her a seat, nor did she take one; though she put her hands on the back of a chair as if for support.

"Mr. Grale!" she gasped, "Mr. Grale! They are saying in the place, that Edgar killed your son Allan!"

"Well," said Mr. Grale, slowly and heavily, "I cannot help that."

"But it cannot be true. It is not true!"

"Not true? Ask him."

Maria was taken with a fit of shivering. What did it all mean? Her thoughts were busy, full of tumult, and there was a pause of silence.

"Mr. Grale," she impulsively cried, gazing at him and reading too surely that he at least believed the accusation, "do you know about the diamond cross?"

"Mr. Grale looked at her with surprised and angry eyes, in which however there lay a certain pain. "The diamond cross?" he repeated. "I know all about the diamond cross. There is not much to know, Miss Vivian. It is safe in our possession. It lies in my wife's jewel box."

"Are you quite sure?" whispered Maria.

"I am quite sure," replied Mr. Grale. "I saw it there myself but a few days ago. Why do you come to me to ask this?"

"It—is—there!" repeated Maria, as if unable to take in the fact.

"It is."

Maria did not shriek; she did not faint; but her hands relaxed their grasp of the chair helplessly, and fell by her side. As Mr. Grale moved forward to her assistance, her lips parted to speak, but closed again in silence. Turning, she walked to the room door; and when she had passed through it, she halted to look back at Mr. Grale.

Staggering, like one who has been dealt some great blow, Maria set off to walk to the Court, and Mr. Grale sat down to his desk again.

Half an hour later, the blacksmith, taking an evening stroll with his next-door neighbour, came upon Miss Vivian lying in a dead faint among the long grass by the roadside. With kindly, reverent hands, they raised her head and the neighbour ran for some water. But she gave no sign of returning consciousness.

"I reckon Mr. Edgar Vivian may have another life to answer for as well as young Grale's," whispered the smith to his neighbour.

"That's so," was the answer. "Hush! she's coming to. Look!"

(To be continued.)

THE AMETHYST SEAL.

By T. W. SPEIGHT, AUTHOR OF "IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT."

I.

THE turret clock struck two.

Luncheon was just over at Wenlock Towers, and on the terrace two young men were pacing slowly, smoking their cigars and talking between the whiffs. They were both tall and good-looking. One of them was Bruce Wenlock, a captain in a crack cavalry regiment, and the eldest son of Sir George Wenlock, the owner of the Towers. The other was his half-cousin, Harold Dare, at present a junior clerk in Her Majesty's Office of the Green Wand.

Young Wenlock was dark, with black hair and a heavy moustache. His face was a very pleasant one, especially when he smiled, and his eyes looked into yours with a frankness and candour that were almost boyish. He spoke with a slight lisp which many people took to be an affectation, whereas it was a natural defect and one which he could not help.

Dare had light hair and steel-blue eyes, and his face was closely shaven. His features were good, but their expression was hard and somewhat cynical. There was a certain undefinable something in his face that made him look several years older than he was.

It was a bright, frosty afternoon, and the time was some three weeks before Christmas. The house had been full of company. There had been shooting, riding, dancing, charades, amateur-acting, and unlimited flirtation. But the guests were now gone—all except Harold Dare, who was, however, looked upon almost as one of the family—and he was going back to town by the evening train.

"If you are really as fond of her as you say you are, why don't you ask her to marry you? I don't know a prettier or a better girl than Elinor Trenton." The speaker was Captain Wenlock.

The other gave his shoulders an expressive shrug, and took another whiff at his cigar before answering. Then he said: "That she is both pretty and good I fully agree with you, and certainly I never cared for anyone else in the way I care for her. But look at the position. I am a pauper; Miss Trenton is a pauper; and neither of us has much prospect of ever being anything else. My dear Bruce, I am not equal to such a prospect."

"Your bachelor life in London has made a coward of you," returned Captain Wenlock. "What is a man worth who would not dare anything for the sake of winning the girl of his heart? There are worse ills in life than poverty."

"As if you knew the meaning of the word, or were ever likely to do so!" answered Dare, with a half-veiled sneer. "I admire your enthusiasm, but I cannot imitate it. No! I will hie me back to my lonely chambers, and try to think of the witching smiles and sunny eyes of sweet Elinor Trenton as being so many luxuries beyond a poor man's reach."

For a few minutes the two men walked and smoked in silence.

"I rather fancy my father would like you and Elinor to make a match of it," remarked Captain Wenlock, presently.

Dare favoured his companion with a swift, keen glance out of his steel-blue eyes, but did not answer in words.

"By the bye," said Harold, presently, "what has become of that young fellow—Boyd I think his name was—to whom I was introduced when I was down here last? It seemed to me at the time that he was rather sweet on Miss Trenton."

"James Boyd, you mean, and a very nice fellow. He is a railway engineer, and has gone out to Buenos Ayres. I certainly was inclined to think that Elinor had found a weak place in his armour; but I don't believe any real harm was done. In any case, it's a far cry to South America, and, as he has gone out under a three years' agreement, he is not likely to trouble you for some time to come."

Again the two young men took a turn or two in silence. Then Bruce said: "I am going down to the post-office presently. You may as well walk as far with me, and I daresay Elinor will go also. It is a shame to stay indoors on such a lovely afternoon."

"All right," answered Harold, a little absently.

Bruce stopped in his walk, and putting his hand into the breast pocket of his shooting-jacket, he drew therefrom a long blue envelope, sealed with a great splash of red wax. "If this could reveal its secrets it might tell us something worth knowing," he said, with a little laugh, as he turned it over in his fingers.

"What is it?" asked Harold, and his keen eyes looked as if they would like to pierce the envelope and get at the secrets within.

"It is a draft of the governor's will," answered Bruce, as he replaced the document in his pocket, "which he is sending to his lawyers, Symes and Symes, of Bedford Row. He was engaged all the morning in drawing it up, and has asked me to post it for him in person."

"Do you mean to say that my uncle"—he always spoke of the baronet in that relation—"has not made his will before now?"

"It seems like it, although I had no knowledge of the fact. I fancy he has some sort of superstitious prejudice against making his will: many people have; but since that last attack I suppose he has made up his mind to delay no longer."

In a little while Bruce spoke again. "I hope with all my heart that he has not forgotten either you or Elinor in it," he said

earnestly ; "though I do not think it at all likely that he would do so."

This was a generous-hearted wish on the part of Bruce Wenlock, seeing that he was his father's only son, and that whatever was bequeathed to others would be so much loss to himself.

Dare threw a quick glance at his companion's face.

"I believe he really means what he says," he muttered to himself. He had a vague feeling that were he in Bruce's place no such wish would emanate from him.

Presently Bruce went indoors to write a note, after which the cousins were to walk down to the village together. Harold was not sorry to be left alone for a little while.

One remark of Bruce's had set him thinking ; had indeed driven his thoughts into quite a new channel. His cousin had said : "If this could reveal its secrets it might tell us something worth knowing." Harold could not get these words out of his mind. It would indeed be a secret worth knowing if he could by any means ascertain the baronet's intentions with regard to himself. No one but himself knew how near he was to the verge of ruin. Not much longer would Mr. Shadrach wait for his money unless he could prove to that astute individual's satisfaction that a policy of delay would bring him in more substantial advantages in time to come. Sir George had made him an allowance of two hundred a year ever since he had entered on his duties at the office of the Green Wand, so that he was scarcely likely to forget him in his will. But the question was as to the limit which the baronet in such a case would set to his generosity. Would he think five thousand pounds too little to bequeath to the son of his cousin ? would he think ten thousand pounds too much ? or was it not just possible that Sir George might satisfy his conscience by bequeathing him a paltry legacy of one or two thousand only ? What would he not give for a glimpse at the paper at that moment in Bruce Wenlock's pocket !

Then again as regarded Elinor Trenton, although she was only Sir George's ward and no relation at all, he was almost sure to remember her in his will. He had no daughter of his own and did not disguise his liking for Elinor. What more natural than that he should put her name down for a legacy of five or six thousand pounds. If he, Harold, could only assure himself that such was the fact he would propose to her at once. He was in love with her as much as it was in his nature to be in love with anyone, but as he had told himself over and over again, he could not afford to marry a penniless wife. If only some wizard would put that red-sealed paper into his hands for three minutes, what a chapter of the future would be revealed to him ! Were there no possible means, fair or unfair—in such a case it would be foolish to stick at trifles—by which he could obtain a sight at it ? No : none, none !

He sighed, lit a fresh cigar, and continued his solitary pacing to and fro. A few minutes later he was joined by Captain Wenlock and Miss Trenton, and the three set off to walk to the village post-office, three quarters of a mile away.

Harold Dare might well be excused for falling in love with Elinor Trenton. She was in truth a girl that seemed to overflow with sunshine and happiness. Melancholy and she seemed as far as the poles asunder. And yet she was entirely dependent, just now, on the bounty of Sir George, and with no future worth speaking of from a worldly point of view. It was her nature to be happy, and to make those around her the same, as far as lay in her power, and she never tried to be different.

It was pleasant walking along the dry, hard, country roads, that bright frosty afternoon. Dare, who had usually an easy flow of conversation in whatever company he might happen to find himself, was to-day more distract and silent than usual. The same thought that had filled his mind on the terrace was still at work here, and would not be put aside. Thus it fell out that the Captain and Miss Trenton had most of the conversation to themselves.

The Stilwater post-office was also a draper's shop. As, however, the captain's letters were already stamped there was no occasion for him to go inside. He took the letters out of his pocket, glanced once more at the addresses on them, and then dropped them one by one into the box. The last to leave his fingers was the blue envelope with the red seal. Harold Dare felt as though he should like to follow it into the letter-box. It was gone, irrevocably gone !

They decided to return home by a different and a longer route, which would prolong their walk. It was past five when they reached the Towers. Dinner to-day was to be an early and informal affair, as Harold would have to leave almost as soon as it was over ; besides which, Sir George was too indisposed to leave his room, and his sister, Mrs. Borrowdale, was away visiting, so that the young people would dine by themselves.

When Harold reached his room he began mechanically to pack his belongings. He had one largish portmanteau and a small Gladstone bag. When the process was completed he sat down in an easy chair in front of his dressing-room fire, and leaning back with his hands behind his head, fell once more into a brown study. The subject of his thoughts was the same that it had been before. If only—if only he could obtain a sight of that rough draft of his uncle's will ! If only he knew the best or the worst, he could then decide in what way to meet that future which was now coming so imminently upon him !

He had sat for full ten minutes without moving, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, when he suddenly sprang to his feet. His face flushed and then grew pale.

"By Jove," he muttered to himself. The exclamation was a

commonplace one, but the way he gave utterance to it meant a great deal. Then he sat down again and fell to staring into the fire, as though in the glowing embers he saw bodied forth some vision or picture projected from his own mental retina.

He was still sitting thus when the first bell rang. This roused him. He rose and pushed back his chair, and as he did so he said aloud: "I'll do it and take the risk."

If Harold Dare had seemed dull and out of sorts in the afternoon no one could have complained of his lack of spirits at dinner that evening. He laughed and joked and talked enough nonsense for two men. But his gaiety had something forced and feverish about it, and he drank considerably more wine than was customary with him. Elinor looked at him once or twice with a little wonder, but the Captain thought to himself that he had never seen his cousin "in better form."

After dinner there was time for a little music. Elinor sang a couple of songs. Dare turned over her music and hovered round her with the air and empressement of a devoted suitor. Miss Trenton neither encouraged nor repulsed him, but treated him precisely as she treated Captain Wenlock. She had often puzzled Harold before, and she puzzled him again this evening; but just then he had other matters to occupy his thoughts.

Presently the wheels of the dogcart were heard crunching the gravel on the drive. The time had come to say good-bye. It had been the captain's intention to drive his cousin to the station, but Sir George having intimated his desire that his son should spare an hour or two after dinner to look through some business papers, a groom had been deputed to take charge of the dogcart.

Sir George—a fine specimen of an English country gentleman, but at present sadly out of health—bade his young kinsman a cordial farewell, told him not to fail to come and see them at Christmas, and then slipped an envelope into his unreluctant palm, which, on opening later on, he found to contain a cheque for a hundred guineas.

Next came Harold's farewell to Elinor. He would fain have thrown a sort of veiled tenderness over their parting, and was desirous that an aroma of sentiment should cling to it. But the laughter in Miss Trenton's eyes dismayed him from trying any such experiment. So, as it fell out, they parted gaily enough, like acquaintances who might or who might not meet again in a little while.

A warm grip of the hand from Bruce Wenlock, and then Harold Dare climbed into the dogcart, and buttoned his ulster about him. His black bag was under the seat; his portmanteau was to follow him on the morrow.

"To Barrowcliff station, I suppose, sir?" said Perkins, as they passed through the lodge gates.

"No; to Thorndale station. That will suit me better."

Not another word spoke he, but puffed at his cigar in grim silence till the lights of the station came in view, and the four miles' drive was at an end. Then he took his bag, saw the groom set off on the road home, and made his way towards the booking-office.

II.

THE village of Stilwater, where Captain Wenlock posted his letters, may be said to form the apex of an irregular triangle, of which the railway stations of Barrowcliff and Thorndale formed the respective points of the base. It was rather more than four miles from Stilwater to Thorndale, and rather more than five miles from the same place to Barrowcliff. Both the stations were on one of the direct trunk lines from south to north, and vice-versâ. Barrowcliff was a manufacturing town of some pretensions, whereas Thorndale was nothing but a pretty hamlet—but it was a hamlet round which were clustered the mansions of several county magnates, and for that reason, if for no other, a considerable number of trains, both up and down, were timed to call at the little station.

As a consequence of there being no station at Stilwater, the post-bags pertaining to that place were conveyed by mail-cart to and from Barrowcliff, a fact of which Mr. Harold Dare was thoroughly cognisant.

That gentleman, after bidding the groom good-night, went inside the station and devoted a full quarter of an hour to a study of the different time-tables suspended on the booking-office walls. Then, as soon as the little window was opened, he proceeded to take his ticket, but not, as anyone would have supposed, for London, but for Barrowcliff, five miles in the opposite direction. A few minutes later the down train steamed into the station, and a quarter of an hour after that Dare alighted at the place for which he had booked. He glanced at the station clock as he did so and saw that it was half-past eight.

No one there was likely to know him, and he entered the refreshment-room without hesitation. The night was very cold, and a little hot grog under such circumstances is allowable. Then he filled his pocket-flask with brandy, lit a cigar, and sallied forth. On his way through the town he called at a chemist's shop and made a small purchase. The station at Barrowcliff was in the suburbs of the town, and in a little while Dare had left the streets behind him, and found himself on the quiet country road that led to Stilwater. It was requisite that he should now time his movements with great accuracy. He took out his watch under the last gas lamp, before plunging into the darkness of the country, and found that he had still ample time for his purpose. The night was clear and frosty; the stars gleamed in the sky like shining points of steel.

Harold went on his way, scarcely meeting a creature, until he reached a point on which he had fixed previously in his own mind. A little way back from the road, on a piece of waste land, stood the carcases, as they are called, of two new houses which had never been completed, in all probability because the builder had fallen short of funds. They had been standing untouched any time these two years, and Harold had noticed them more than once when journeying between Stilwater and Barrowcliff. Nothing could well look more desolate and forlorn. They were so many bare walls of bare brick, roofed in with bare slates, and that was all ; windowless and doorless they stood, open to all the winds that blew.

When Dare reached this lonely spot he came to a stand. For full two minutes he stood without moving, listening intently. For any sound of human life that he could hear he might have been the last man left alive in the world. Satisfied that he had nothing to fear on the score of being seen or heard, he crossed the patch of weed-covered ground and entered one of the unfinished houses. Here he halted and struck a match, with which he lighted a small bull's-eye lantern which he produced from his bag. Throwing the rays of the lantern before him, so as to save himself from stumbling over any obstacle which might chance to be in his path, he passed forward into one of the back rooms, where he felt that he would be still safer from the observation of any chance passer-by. Then opening his bag again he brought forth from its recesses a black wig and a thick black moustache, which had formed part of his "make-up" when playing the character of Captain Hawtree in a scene from *Caste* at Wenlock Towers. The wig he proceeded to draw on over his own closely-cropped head of light hair ; while the moustache was readily fixed in its place by the aid of a little spirit-gum. His next proceeding was to substitute for the low-crowned felt hat he had been wearing a high-crowned opera hat which he had brought with him, shut up, in his bag. Then having tied a thick white muffler round his neck, he felt that his disguise was complete.

Leaving his bag in a corner of the unfinished house, but taking his lantern with him after having turned on the dark slide, Harold Dare issued forth, and after listening intently for a few seconds he crossed the waste ground to the high road, and then set off at a rapid pace in the direction of Stilwater.

The mail-cart between Stilwater and Barrowcliff had been driven by one man for thirty years. His name was John Pegram, and he had now turned his sixtieth birthday. John's jolly, rubicund visage was known to everybody, and everybody averred that he was no one's enemy but his own. It was universally believed, however, that John could drive better when he was "half seas over" than when he was perfectly sober ; and as for his old bay mare, you had only to put her head in the direction you wanted her to go and she required no driving at all.

John left the post-office at Stilwater with the mail-bags for London and the South between half-past nine and a quarter to ten every night, so as to be in time to catch the up-mail at Barrowcliff station at 10.30. Of this fact Harold Dare was perfectly aware, he and Captain Wenlock having met the old man more than once when out on summer evenings for a late walk along the country roads, and it was of this knowledge that Dare had now determined to avail himself. He had timed his calculations with a view of encountering the mail-cart about half way between the village and the station, at a spot where, for a mile or more, the road ran between two high banks covered with thick hedgerows. He was aware that John, out of pure good nature, or it may be with an eye to an extra glass of grog, although it was contrary to his instructions, sometimes gave a lift on the cart to some belated friend or acquaintance whom he might chance to overtake on the road, and he could only hope most devotedly that to-night of all nights the old driver might be alone.

As soon as Dare reached that part of the road where it began to dip between the high banks he slackened his pace somewhat, and after every few yards that he advanced he stood still for a few seconds to listen. He had advanced thus cautiously for about half a mile when his quick ears caught the faint sound of wheels in the distance. His heart gave a great bound, and he was obliged to steady himself for a few moments against the trunk of a tree. The sound could now be plainly heard coming towards him on the frost-hardened road. At once he turned and began to retrace his steps in the direction of Barrowcliff. The vehicle, whatever it might be, came nearer and nearer, till in a little while it was but a few yards behind him. Now or never was his chance.

Halting suddenly and flinging a quick backward glance into the darkness he could just make out that it was indeed the mail cart, and that there was only one figure on the box.

"Ith that you, John Pegwam?" he called out, with a capital imitation of his cousin's voice and lisp.

"Aye, it's me, sure enough. And who may you be?" came the answer, while the old mare, hearing voices, slackened her pace of her own accord.

"Don't you know me? Captain Wenlock."

"Blest if I knew you, sir, it's so dark hereabouts. Woa, Tulip, lass." The mare came to a dead halt. "Can I do anything for you, Captain?"

"You can give me a lift as far as the station, if you like. The night was so fine I started to walk, but I'm afraid I shall miss my train." All this was said with a lisp precisely as Bruce Wenlock would have spoken it.

"All right, Captain. I'm in good time, to-night. Just put your foot on that step and catch hold of this strap and there you are."

Five seconds later Harold Dare was sitting by the side of John

Pegram, and Tulip had resumed her jog-trot pace on her way to the station.

John had known Bruce Wenlock ever since the latter was a youth home from school for his holidays, and had had more than one half-crown from him for doing little commissions in Barrowcliff for the young man. It is scarcely needful to say that the old driver had not the slightest suspicion that the man sitting by his side was other than he had represented himself to be.

Dare, who had heard mention made of John's convivial propensities, at once perceived that the old man had not started on his cold drive without getting what he himself would have termed pretty well "primed" beforehand. This state of things to a certain extent helped forward the end Dare had in view, inasmuch as John would be likely to succumb more readily to further temptation in the same direction. In fact, they had not gone more than a hundred yards before Dare said: "This is the sort of weather when a man feels the want of something warm inside to fight against the cold outside." With that he drew his flask from his pocket, opened it, poured some of the contents into the cup, and pretended to drink it off. Then pouring a quantity more into the cup he handed it to John. "Swallow this, old boy; you will find it do you good," he said.

John drew Tulip up into a walk, and took the flask in his left hand. He was quite aware that he had already taken as much, or more, perhaps, than was good for him. But the odour of the brandy was sweet to him, and the night was certainly very cold, and his conscience was not in the habit of making much of a fight on such occasions. The natural consequence ensued: he hesitated, and was lost. Lifting the silver cup to his lips, he swallowed the contents at one huge gulp.

The spirit was potent, and John coughed a little as he jogged Tulip to get up her pace again. "That's strong stuff, captain, and it's got a queer twang with it," he said. "What may be the name of it, now?"

"It's Dutch brandy; what the mynheers drink in Holland."

"Ah, I've heard say as how they are a rum lot over there."

It was not Dare's policy to talk, so he made no reply. But if he did not talk he watched his companion keenly. The crucial moment was at hand.

Presently John Pegram's head began to nod ominously. He pulled himself up with a jerk, yawned, and rubbed his eyes with his disengaged hand. For two or three minutes all went well. Then his head began to nod again, then he drew himself up again, but not so successfully as before. One or two further faint struggles he made, but in vain. His eyes felt as if they had leaden weights on them, a numbness crept through all his limbs, his chin sank forward on his chest; John was fast asleep. One hand still grasped the reins; he was kept from falling by the strap round his waist, which was securely

buckled to the iron-work of his seat. Tulip, unconscious that anything out of the ordinary was happening behind her, jogged quietly on her way.

Nothing happened to mar Harold Dare's scheme. They met one or two vehicles returning from Barrowcliff, and three or four belated pedestrians, but the sight of two people instead of one on the box of the mail-cart was not so unusual as to call for particular notice. Here and there they passed a farm-house, but the lights were all extinguished, and the inmates in bed long ago. And so, after what seemed to Harold a greater number of hours than they were minutes in reality, the mail cart reached the waste plot of ground on which stood the two unfinished houses. Here Harold contrived to get possession of the reins, although not without a little difficulty. John's fingers seemed to grip them instinctively, sound asleep though he was, and even after they had been taken from him his hand still kept its shape and position as before.

An admonitory tug brought Tulip to a stand. Harold listened with all his might for the sound of anything that might be approaching either from one direction or the other; but all was silence, the most profound. Then he turned the mare's head towards the waste ground, and leaping down, led her round a gable of the empty houses, and so to the back of them, where nothing could be seen from the high road. This done, he climbed into the cart again and turned on the light of his bull's-eye.

The mail bags were contained in a receptacle at the back of the cart, the lid of which was simply fastened with a hasp. The first bag that Harold drew out was the very one he wanted. It bore a brass label with the word "London" on it, and its mouth was tied round with string, sealed with coarse red wax. Harold's sharp penknife quickly cut through the string, and then the bag was open to his hand.

The correspondence between Stilwater and the outer world was, as a rule, not very voluminous, and the bag was only about one third full. Harold's eager fingers had little difficulty in finding the particular packet they were in search of, seeming to close on it instinctively the moment they touched it. Satisfying himself by a single glance that he had not made a mistake, he thrust the packet into his breast-pocket, blew out his lantern, hurriedly tied up the mouth of the bag, put it back amongst the other bags, shut down the lid, and leaped lightly to the ground.

Then entering the empty house, Dare quickly found his own bag in the corner where he had left it. It was a work of very little time to divest himself of his wig, moustache, opera-hat, and white muffler. Then taking his bag in one hand, he went back to the mail-cart, and leading Tulip by the head, they were all presently on the solitary high road again. The mare's head was turned in the direction of Stilwater, the reins were replaced in John's unconscious fingers, and

Tulip being bidden to "gee-up," started off at a brisk trot, being probably quite aware that she was on her way back to the stable. That night the Stilwater letter-bag never reached London.

Having seen the mail-cart and its sleeping driver disappear in the darkness, Harold Dare set off at a rapid pace on his way back to Barrowcliff. He reached the station in due course, but by that time the London mail had gone—for which he was not sorry—after waiting five minutes beyond its specified time for the Stilwater bags. But the down mail to the north was due in a quarter of an hour, and by that he booked. Two hours later he found himself in Manchester. There he stayed the night, and travelled up to town by an early train, but by a different route, next morning.

All this time he had kept the stolen packet unopened in his pocket. Impatient as he was to master the secret of its contents, he deemed it best not to attempt to open the envelope till the proper means for doing so were ready to his hand. In his rooms he had a spirit-lamp, with an apparatus for making coffee. With the jet of steam from this he carefully melted the seal, and by the same means removed the stamps which had been defaced at the Stilwater post-office. Then he was free to read that for which he had run so many risks.

He sat down in his easy chair trembling with excitement, and drew the folded foolscap from its envelope. His uncle's crabbed writing was familiar to him, and he had no difficulty in deciphering it. His eye skimmed the manuscript rapidly, taking no note of details, till on the third page he found the first mention of his own name. "To my kinsman, Harold Dare, I bequeath the sum of eight thousand pounds."

Eight thousand pounds! It was more, far more, than his hopes had dared to foreshadow. All would yet be well with him. His heart gave a great throb of relief, the hand that held the paper dropped by his side; for the moment he was overcome.

But there was something else that he was almost equally anxious to see. He turned over another page, and there found what he was looking for. "To my beloved ward, Elinor Trenton, who has been to me as a dear daughter, I bequeath the sum of six thousand pounds."

Why, this was better and better! Harold felt that he had never loved Elinor nearly so much as at that moment; never had she seemed so dear to him before. He made up his mind there and then that he would propose to her at Christmas, and he had a sufficiently good opinion of himself to feel little doubt as to the result. His star was evidently in the ascendant.

When he had in some measure recovered his equanimity he read the draft through carefully, clause by clause. There was nothing else in it that interested him. Of course the bulk of everything went to his cousin, Bruce—it could not be otherwise.

Now that he had ascertained all that it behoved him to know, the

question arose as to the best and safest mode of forwarding the document to its destination so that no suspicion that it had been tampered with should be aroused in the mind of its recipient. He lit a cigar and lay back in his chair, with his eyes fixed on one corner of the ceiling. By the time his smoke was finished he had made up his mind as to the safest course to pursue. He would replace the manuscript in its original envelope ; it would never do to put it into a fresh one and address it in his own writing ; and would carefully seal it up again. Only, and here was the rub, he would have to make use of a seal of his own wherewith to impress the wax, which, as a matter of course, would be altogether different from the one used by Sir George. He could not see that the difference would matter. How was Mr. Symes to know that the seal was other than his client's ?

Going into his dressing-room he unlocked an old-fashioned bureau which stood there, and took out of one of the drawers a certain amethyst seal, set in gold, which once upon a time had belonged to his father. It was one of those ponderous seals which gentlemen used to wear attached to their watches, some forty or fifty years ago. How it had come into his father's possession, Harold had never heard. It was beautifully cut. On the upper side were two hands clasped as if in friendship ; underneath the hands was a dagger, point downwards ; and below that the one word *Désormais*. No one knew that he had such a seal in his possession ; what could be safer than to make use of it in an emergency such as the present ?

Accordingly the envelope was reclosed, and the hot wax stamped with the impress of the amethyst seal. Then fresh postage stamps were affixed over the place where the original ones had been, and then there was nothing more to do save to drop the packet into the nearest pillar box. He waited till dusk before doing this. Then with a sigh of relief that his dangerous task was safely over, he turned and walked slowly in the direction of his club.

III.

THE "Robbery of the Stilwater Mail," as it was called, was a regular godsend to the newspapers, big and little, happening, as it did, at that dead season of the year which comes just before Christmas. But a mystery it was at the beginning, and a mystery it seemed likely to remain to the end of the chapter.

Captain Wenlock had no difficulty in proving an alibi. Indeed, all who knew him ridiculed the idea of his being mixed up in any way in such an affair. He had plenty of witnesses to vouch that he had never left home on the evening in question. Still, the affair annoyed both him and Sir George considerably.

On the second day after the discovery, Sir George said to his son : "You had better telegraph to Symes and ask him whether he has received the draft of the will all right." So the Captain rode into

Barrowcliff and sent off his message, and waited for the reply, which was: "Draft of will safely to hand." So the baronet's mind was set at rest on that score.

About a week later Mr. Symes in person arrived at Wenlock Towers. He brought with him Sir George's will, drawn up in due form, in accordance with the instructions which he had received. He dined and slept at the Towers, and had an interview with the Baronet in his own room next morning. The will was read over and approved of. The Vicar of the parish and Mr. Selwyn of Crombie, who were to act as witnesses, would arrive a little later on and stay to luncheon.

When Mr. Symes had finished reading the will, he said to his client: "Here is the draft, Sir George, which I received from you by post. I thought it best to give it back into your own hands."

"It's only so much waste paper now, and may as well be burnt. By-the-bye, it was posted the very night the London bag was broken open by some scoundrel who personated my son. I suppose, however, that you received it in the course of the following day?"

"No, I didn't," returned the lawyer. "This envelope, as you may see for yourself, if you care to examine it, bears the Stilwater postmark of December 3rd, the London postmark of the 4th, and it reached my office by the first delivery on the morning of the 5th."

Sir George rang for his son. "I thought you told me," he said to Bruce, "that the letters which were in the bag that was broken open on the night of the 3rd, were sent on by the six o'clock train next morning, and would be delivered in London by mid-day or a little later?"

"That is quite correct, sir."

"Yet Symes tells me he didn't receive the draft of the will till the morning of the fifth."

"That is certainly very singular," answered Bruce.

The draft, still in its original envelope, was on the table. Bruce took it up with a view of examining the postmarks, but the moment his eye fell on the seal, which was still intact—Mr. Symes, in his business-like way, having cut carefully round it with a penknife, when opening the envelope—the expression of his countenance changed.

"When I posted this document, sir," he said, turning to his father, "I certainly did not notice that you had fastened it up with a seal that I had never seen before."

"Eh—what!" exclaimed the Baronet. "I only sealed it with the seal I always use."

Bruce handed him the envelope without another word. Sir George put on his spectacles and crossed to the window and examined the seal minutely. "Symes—Bruce," he exclaimed presently in a hollow voice, "this envelope has been tampered with! This is no seal of mine; I never saw it before."

The three men looked at each other in consternation. On what followed it is not needful that we should dwell. The whole affair

was shrouded in mystery. The more they asked themselves who could possibly have done it, and what end the person who did it could have had in view, the more bewildered they became. After a long discussion, the only conclusion they could arrive at was, that the document must have been abstracted from the letter bag—together probably with others—on the supposition that it contained notes or negotiable securities of some kind, and that when it was found to contain nothing of value, it had been resealed and forwarded to its destination.

Sir George was much put about by the affair. It seemed to dwell in his mind even more than the fact of his son having been personated by some unknown scoundrel. It worried him and irritated him beyond measure.

But at the very time Mr. Symes was at the Towers, another link in the same chain of circumstances was being forged elsewhere. On the same evening that the lawyer and Captain Wenlock dined together, Harold Dare was dining at a friend's house in the suburbs of London. The weather was very bad, and Harold, who hated discomfort of any kind, was easily persuaded into accepting a bed for the night. Next morning, on his way back to the office, he found that he had left his keys at home overnight, and was consequently compelled to drive round there in the hansom he had engaged at the station. On entering his rooms he was astounded to find that they had been broken into during his absence, and the whole place rifled. He sent at once for the police, and while they were examining the premises, he proceeded to make out an inventory of the stolen property.

If the burglars had expected to find much property of value in Harold's rooms, they must have been woefully disappointed. Harold was not rich enough to have much spare jewellery over and above that which he usually wore, but all that there was they had made a clean sweep of. A couple of five-pound notes, which had been in a drawer of his writing-desk, were also missing. But what he, perhaps, regretted more than all the rest was an old-fashioned watch that had belonged to his father, a diamond and pearl brooch that had been his mother's, and—the amethyst seal.

He enumerated each article that had been stolen, describing them as far as his memory served him, but when he handed the list to the police, it was with a rueful foreboding that he would never see or hear anything more of his property.

On the morning of the 23rd of December, Harold Dare left London to spend his Christmas at Wenlock Towers. He took half-a-dozen newspapers with him in the train, and he amused himself on the way down by picking out and reading their latest comments on what they had now come to term "The Stilwater Mystery." By this time there was little more left for them to say than that up to the latest date the police had failed in obtaining any clue to the perpetrator of this remarkable outrage. Harold smiled to himself as he read.

Bruce Wenlock met him at the station with the dogcart.

"I have made up my mind at last," said Harold, as they drove along together.

"Made up your mind to what?"

"To propose to Elinor Trenton."

"You ought to have made up your mind long ago, as I advised you."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that you are too late in the field. James Boyd proposed to her yesterday and was accepted."

Dare sat like a man stupefied. After a long silence he said: "I thought you told me that Boyd was under a three years' engagement in South America."

"So he is. He went out as sub-engineer, but the chief engineer having died, they have given Boyd his berth. He is over in England to see about some new machinery, and I suppose he thinks that he can now afford to marry."

There was another long pause before Harold spoke again. Then he asked: "Does your father know of this arrangement?"

"Certainly he does—and approves of it. You must remember that James Boyd is the son of one of his oldest friends."

"And he will have six thousand pounds with his wife, though he doesn't know it," said Harold to himself.

His thoughts were very bitter. He loved Elinor Trenton as much as it was in his shallow, selfish nature to love anyone other than himself; and—such is human nature—now that she was lost to him he felt that she was dearer to him than she had ever been before. How he fumed at his stupidity for not having foreseen that Sir George would hardly fail to remember in his will one who had been to him almost as a child of his own, and for not having proposed to her, and run the risk of everything coming right in the end! Yes, his thoughts were very bitter.

He had time to school himself before he met her, so that she should not even suspect the wound under his armour. He greeted her with easy, smiling cordiality, and accorded her his congratulations in a few happily-turned phrases. Never had Harold Dare seemed in a gayer or merrier humour than he was that night. Bruce Wenlock looked on and wondered. Alas! for the morrow.

Next day was Christmas Eve, and the guests began to arrive by ones and twos. On account of the state of Sir George's health the gathering at the Towers this Christmas was to be a comparatively small one, being confined to relatives and the more intimate friends of the family.

Bruce and Harold were playing a game of billiards by the wan light of the afternoon, having the room to themselves, when a servant entered and stated that "a person" from London desired to see Mr. Dare on a matter of importance.

"Show him in here," said Harold, promptly. "Some messenger from the office, I suppose," he remarked to Bruce. "I hope to goodness they don't want me back before my holidays are over."

But when the "person" entered, although he was dressed in plain clothes, Harold at once recognised him as one of the two policemen who had examined his rooms after the robbery. He carried a black bag in one hand.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Dare," said the man, with that air of respectful familiarity which his class know so well how to assume when it pleases them to do so. "But perhaps you don't recollect me, sir?" he added.

"Oh, yes, I recollect you well enough," answered Harold, as he proceeded to chalk the end of his cue.

"That's all right then, sir. You will be pleased to hear that we have caught the rascal who broke into your rooms. On searching him we found a number of pawn tickets, and on going round to the various pawnbrokers, among a list of property stolen from other people, we found nearly all the articles specified in the list which you made out and gave to me. The man was up before the magistrate this morning and remanded for a week; and if you identify the articles contained in this bag as your property, you will be required to appear at Bow Street at two o'clock on Wednesday morning next to swear to that fact."

"All right," answered Harold, who had taken advantage of the break in the game to light a fresh cigar. "And now let us see what you have in the bag."

The constable opened his bag and brought out the articles it contained one by one. Each article was wrapped in a separate piece of paper which he proceeded to unfold, ranging the stolen property in a row along the table as he did so. There was the big, old-fashioned watch, there was the diamond and pearl brooch, there was the amethyst seal, together with sundry rings and other trinkets. Harold glanced his eye over the row. "Yes," said he; "they are mine, all of them, and I am prepared to swear that they were stolen from my rooms on the night of the 12th instant."

"That is all we require you to do, sir," said the officer.

Bruce Wenlock, who was standing by, took up the old watch and examined it, and then took up the amethyst seal. The afternoon was waning rapidly by this time, and he carried the seal to the window that he might have a better view of it. Neither of the others noticed the start he gave a moment or two later. Then he laid a hand on the window-sill as if to steady himself. Presently he went back to the table and laid down the seal without a word, after which he returned to the window and stood as before with his back to the room and its inmates.

A minute or two later the constable, having first been duly tipped by Harold, took his leave, carrying his bag and its contents with him.

"Shall I ring for the servant to light up?" queried Harold.

"I don't care to play any more to-day," was the response.

"You are not ill, I hope," said Harold, struck by the change in his cousin's voice.

"Not at all. By-the-bye, how did that amethyst seal come into your possession?"

Harold, who at that moment was winding up his watch, stopped in the midst of the process, as though all the pulses of his being had suddenly ceased their functions. There was utter silence while a person might have counted six slowly. Then, with an elaborate assumption of carelessness, he replied, "It came to me with a lot of other things at my father's death." With that he finished the winding up of his watch.

"The heraldic design, or whatever it may be called, that is engraved on it, is rather an uncommon one, I should imagine," said Bruce.

"It may be uncommon, or it may be common," responded the other. "It is a point that I never troubled my head about."

"Uncommon as it is, I have seen it once before," resumed Bruce; "and that not very long ago. Can you guess where it was that I saw it?" As he asked this question he turned suddenly and faced his cousin.

There was a sort of stern solemnity in his voice. His tall figure, clearly outlined against the grey disc of the window behind him, seemed to his cousin's guilty conscience to loom taller than human through the gathering gloom.

"You do not answer me," went on Bruce, after a moment's pause. "Such being the case, I will answer for you. In my father's desk is a certain envelope. That envelope, containing a draft of his will, was posted by me in your presence, on the afternoon of the 3rd of December. My father fastened it up himself, and the wax bore the impress of the only seal he ever uses. That envelope and its contents were in the mail-bag which was cut open the same night by some man who took upon himself to personate me in the transaction. When Mr. Symes brought the will to be signed and witnessed, he brought the draft and envelope with him. It was then seen that the latter had been surreptitiously opened and afterwards fastened up again. My father's seal was no longer there, but in its place was another, the impress on which was an exact counterpart of the design cut in the amethyst I held in my hand five minutes ago. Would you like to see the envelope?"

As Bruce's sentences fell slowly one by one on the ears of the wretched man standing opposite to him, the latter's face changed as it had never changed before. He cowered and shrank back a step or two, as though his cousin's words were so many blows which he had neither power nor strength to resist. He put out one hand gropingly as a blind man might have done, and his fingers coming in contact with the back of a chair, he gripped it firmly as though to keep him-

self from falling. When Bruce ceased speaking, he saw through the dusk, not the face of Harold Dare, but a white death-like mask out of which looked two eyes, full of anguish and unutterable despair.

For a few seconds the two men stood gazing at each other without a word. Then Bruce suddenly flung up his arms. "Oh, Harold! Harold!" he cried, in a voice choked with emotion, and turning, he covered his face with his hands and all the man within him was utterly broken. When he looked round, some minutes later, the door was open, and he was alone in the room.

At the end of half an hour he was still sitting there in the dark, "revolving many memories." Then one of the servants brought him a note. "From Mr. Dare, sir," said the man. Bruce went into the next room where there was a lighted lamp, and opened it. This is what he read :

"When this reaches your hands I shall have left your father's house, never to enter it again. For that of which I am guilty I have no excuse to offer beyond this, that it was done under the pressure of a temptation which you would be one of the last to understand or palliate. You, in your position, have never been assailed by such temptations, consequently they would be incomprehensible to you.

"One favour you can do me; it is the last I shall ever ask of you. My secret is yours, and yours alone: let it remain so. Facts could not be altered; no good could be done by allowing it to pass your lips. Let your father still think kindly of me; let Elinor Trenton never know me for the castaway I am.

"And now, farewell. Bruce—dear Bruce!—I shall never, never forget you!"

"H. D."

He was gone, and from that day forward Wenlock Towers knew him no more. Once, about a year later, the two cousins encountered each other casually in Oxford Street. Bruce stopped instinctively and held out his hand, but Harold deliberately averted his eyes and pushed on his way through the crowd, seeing and yet not willing to see.

Captain Wenlock never revealed the secret that had come so strangely into his keeping. An excuse was readily found for his cousin's abrupt departure from the Hall.

When Sir George died, two years afterwards, it was found that he had bequeathed his young kinsman a sum of eight thousand pounds. This amount was duly paid over to the legatee who, a little while later, threw up his situation under Government and quitted England with the avowed intention of settling down on a sheep farm among the far-away wilds of Australia, determined if possible by a new and honourable life to redeem the past.

THE TENDENCY OF DICKENS'S WORKS.

THE great difficulty in this essay is to know which to draw out of the many different threads that must necessarily be woven into the drapery of my subject. The works of Dickens are so many-sided in their views of life, so limitless in their portraiture of character, so teeming with artistic and poetic fancies, so glistening with bright sparks of humour, that it is hard to decide where to begin, and harder still to know where to end.

It is a relief to fall back at once on the aim which actuated the author in all he wrote, and that was—doing good to his fellow men. His aim was single, but the means by which he attained it were many and varied. We will take the broadest and most palpable.

Each of his works presents in turn a vivid picture of some great social evil, some wrong shared by many, or some individual weakness; and so correct are the outlines, so detailed and careful the filling in, so true a perspective does he give, that it is impossible for any average common sense not to detect his real meaning at once. They form an art gallery which we may wander through alone, and learn the great lessons of morality and humanity such as the Great Master, whom Charles Dickens humbly followed, loved to teach.

The first great wrong he pictured was the Workhouse System, in "Oliver Twist." Most of us know the tale. Poverty and suffering on one hand, as personified in little Oliver Twist and his wretched companions; ignorance in authority and its natural development, as seen in the matron and the beadle. And then that Board of Guardians! Many of them men with so exalted an idea of their own position, as guardians of such a philanthropic and beneficent institution, that they never noticed the wretched details of misery and wrong which they swept with their very garments.

We know that Dickens's vivid delineation of this great wrong was substantially correct at the time he drew it, and how far the present improved state of affairs is due to his pen we can only surmise.

His next book was "Nicholas Nickleby." The social evil here depicted was the cruelty and injustice secretly practised in some Yorkshire Schools, the picture of which was so lifelike that one schoolmaster wrote Dickens a threatening letter on account of the exposure. There is no doubt that the effect of this book was to do away with these schools altogether.

There are many more personal lessons to be learnt from the characters in "Nicholas Nickleby": a lesson of benevolence from the Brothers Cheeryble, who, having worked their way upwards through

great difficulties, were able to give a helpful, practical sympathy to others similarly circumstanced, as Nicholas was when he came to them—giving heartily and with pleasant words of the riches they recognised as God's gift. There is something refreshing in the simple, earnest nature of these two brothers, which had remained unspoiled by any worldly prejudice or hardening during all their years of struggle and work. It is a picture of money honestly earned and rightly held, bringing with it an adequate reward.

Ralph Nickleby, the uncle of Nicholas, and author of most of his troubles, is an instance on the other side of a man working for his wealth far harder and with far more heart-burnings than the Brothers Cheeryble; toiling for the mere gratification of getting money until it became a passion with him that warped his whole moral nature. He fed and increased the vein of meanness which he was born with until it broke and saturated his whole being—completely swamping every hope of better things. The suicide's grave where he at last rested seemed but the natural result of such a life.

The next work that appeared was "Barnaby Rudge," and, apart from the wholesome example given in the cheery, unselfish nature of Mr. Varden, the bright-faced locksmith, and the happy genial influence he brought wherever he went, it seems to me that the whole book forms one succession of pictures of the inconsistencies of human nature.

There was the solemn old landlord of the "Maypole," who had gained a reputation for the most profound depth of mind and weighty intellect, simply because his extraordinary dulness and stupidity prevented him from ever having two consecutive ideas in his head at one time—the whole country side regarding him as an oracle of wisdom who could speak if he would.

Then, further on, in that graphic account of the Gordon Riots, there was the amiable, sensitive Lord George Gordon, who could not personally have hurt an insect, and yet became the direct cause of the fiercest riot and wildest confusion. And, in the midst of all this, when Newgate was set on fire and the gates forced open, the men who clamoured loudest to be saved from the flames were the three who were doomed to be hanged on the morrow. Then Dennis, the hangman himself: who took a revolting delight in enlarging on the details of his craft, and went into ecstacies of enjoyment over the way he had worked off such numbers: when, through his treasonable connection with the plot, he was condemned to be hanged, he became the most miserable, abject wretch imaginable, begging and craving for a change in his sentence because he knew what it was.

But we will turn to some one pleasanter: and that is Dolly Varden, the pretty coquettish daughter of the locksmith, who, through pure perverseness, refused with scorn the man she really cared for, and then, when her unkindness had driven him into the army and he returned disabled and a cripple with not a shilling to bless himself

with, met him more than half way and virtually made him an offer.

Then there is Mrs. Varden, whose good spirit always rose to the surface under circumstances that crushed other people's down, and yet who invariably graced any festive occasion with tears and sighs. And surely we most of us have come across a Mrs. Varden. Or rather haven't we ourselves often felt a most unreasonable desire to grumble at something or somebody just when things have squared themselves to our entire satisfaction and we have nothing left to wish for?

The next work that appeared was "Martin Chuzzlewit," and this book seems to me, above all the rest, to be more general and more faithful in its teachings.

We can none of us deny to selfishness the precedence amongst the cardinal sins, nor dispute the fact that it invariably defeats its own ends. In old Martin Chuzzlewit we have an instance of an evil by its own strength utterly spoiling the life of one who, without it, would have been a good man. Apart from this one weak spot in his character there is nothing mean or dishonourable about him. He awakes in us no feeling of contempt, but rather one of sorrow ; the sorrow we feel at the sight of beauty marred, of a good cause ruined, of great strength misplaced.

The motive-power of his life was gratification of self ; and, seeing that he possessed a tolerably decent sort of self, his desires in themselves were mainly right and would have brought no evil. But the mischief lay here : he was kind-hearted enough to feel pleasure at the sight of other people's happiness, but his motive in forwarding that happiness was more his own personal gratification than their good.

His great wish was to see his ward and his nephew married, but because this good thing came about without his help, and he was robbed of the gratification of feeling that he individually had brought it about, he refused to give it his sanction. He was the cause to them of greater suffering than any amount of happiness that he might afterwards bestow could possibly atone for. Yet he really loved them both, but his own pain at witnessing their sorrow was entirely swallowed up by his selfishness. And the worst of it was, he was so blind to his fault, that it took nearly the whole of a life time to open his eyes. It was only the sight of his sins exaggerated in another—seeing himself as others saw him, only rather more so—that at length restored his moral vision.

The nephew himself, young Martin, presents an exactly similar instance of a good man spoiled, and he was cured by seeing the unselfishness of his servant, Mark Tapley.

I need not ask whether these pictures are true to life. We some of us may know from ourselves, and all of us from people we have come across, that this respectable selfishness does exist ; that it often

has no idea of its own name ; that it is very quick to detect itself in others, and to feel true contempt for itself ; that nothing so soon rouses its real admiration as the sight of a man without it ; and that, when those of us who may claim it do get a view of our own wrong, it often works in us a repentance that needs no repenting of, as in the case of the two Chuzzlewits.

And now I must just touch on one more character before I leave this book, and that is Tom Pinch, the man who must have come so near the heart of Dickens, for we feel its generous, healthy pulses as we read. Who besides Dickens could or would have drawn such a hero as Tom Pinch ? A man with no rare mental gifts, no personal beauty, no favourite of fortune, and yet a man around whom our best thoughts love to linger even though they call up self-reproach. A man whose greatness simply meant his goodness. A hero in the sense of one who ruleth his spirit rather than one who taketh a city. Single-heartedness, unselfishness, steadfastness of purpose place Tom Pinch on as high a moral platform as any hero of fiction ; and yet so great was the simplicity of words and manners which accompanied these gifts, so ordinary and unremarkable the circumstances which developed them, that we are unavoidably led to see how perfectly natural such Christian graces might become to our own every-day life.

The next book was "Dombey and Son," and the leading passion here portrayed is pride.

Mr. Dombey is a stern, hard man, immovable and impenetrable as some dark, towering, granite rock, impervious to all outside influences, except such as touched his pride ; pride of his wealth, his position, his family name, and all these things centred in his little motherless son, Paul, who was to perpetuate the great name of Dombey. All the care that wealth and thought could procure was lavished on the boy in his infancy. Then, before he had quite left that period, his intellect was taken in hand to be developed and expanded when it had as yet barely shown itself, and, of course, the natural consequence followed. The frail little sapling of the great Dombey tree drooped and died ; the proud man had to bow his will to God's over-ruling power ; and the idol at whose shrine he had sacrificed all the higher and better capabilities of his soul was brought to the ground. It was only after many long years of bitterness and obstinacy of spirit that he was at length brought to the knowledge that his extremity had been God's opportunity of doing him good and not evil.

We will pass over "David Copperfield," which contains so much of the author's personal experience, and just touch on "Little Dorrit."

The name gives you the key-note of the book. It is one long sermon on the beauty of unselfishness, practically shown in the life of the heroine. It is by no means one of his best books, and yet Dickens seems to me to have draped "Little Dorrit" in his most beautiful gar-

ment, and to have lingered lovingly over his work, giving perfect touches here and there.

Her intense and oftenest unappreciated love for her father ; the tender veil with which she covered all his weakness and his wrong, even from herself when possible ; the way in which her whole thought and happiness were wrapped up in the lives of others ; the heroism of which her keenly sensitive soul was capable when the interests of those she loved were at stake : all these things seem at first to make Little Dorrit more a grand impossibility than a living reality. Such pure unselfishness could hardly have existed in an atmosphere of mere morality ; but Dickens gives us one glimpse of a higher than a moral power in her life which precludes impossibilities.

The other books of Dickens must be passed over with a bare mention. There is "Bleak House," with its warnings against Chancery, and its telling examples of this great evil, most of them taken from life. "Hard Times," showing the miserable consequences of educating the head and neglecting to improve the heart. Then there were the different "Christmas Tales," which carried their messages of goodwill towards men to so many hearths, warming the hearts of the readers with such true Christmas cheer.

I have been wondering what little bit out of all these books I should give you, to show how simply and naturally Dickens brings us face to face with his characters, and makes us understand and sympathise with their joys and griefs however far apart their circumstances and our own may be.

There is the end of old Betty Higden, the poor, proud, independent-spirited old woman, whose life-long horror had been the parish, or parish help in any form, and who at last was pursued even to death by this same phantom. The following extract is taken from the end of her hard life. The money which is to pay for her burial is stitched in her dress, and her one great hope is to wander on alone until death has for ever closed all workhouses against her.

"Old Betty Higden fared upon her pilgrimage as many ruggedly honest creatures, women and men, fare on their toiling way along the roads of life. Patiently to earn a spare bare living, and quietly to die untouched by workhouse hands—this was her highest sublunary hope.

"The weather had been hard, and the roads had been bad, and her spirit was up. Faithful soul ! When she had spoken to the secretary of 'that deadness that steals over me at times,' her fortitude had made too little of it. Oftener, and ever oftener, it came stealing over her ; darker, and ever darker, like the shadow of advancing death. That the shadow should be deep as it came on, like the shadow of an actual presence, was in accordance with the laws of the physical world, for all the light that shone on Betty Higden lay beyond death.

"The poor old creature had taken the upward course of the River Thames as her general track ; it was the track in which her last home lay, and of which she last had local love and knowledge. She had sold, and knitted and sold, and gone on.

"In the pleasant towns about, her figure came to be quite well known for some short weeks, and then again passed on. But the old abhorrence grew stronger on her as she grew weaker, and it found more sustaining food than she did in her wanderings.

"Sometimes she would light upon a poor, decent person, like herself, going afoot on a pilgrimage of many weary miles to see some worn-out relative or friend who had been charitably clutched off to a great, blank, barren Union House, far from the old home. Sometimes she would hear read out of a newspaper, how the Registrar-General cast up the units that had within the last week died of want and exposure to the weather, for which that recording angel seemed to have a regular fixed place in his sum, as if they were its half-pence.

"All such things she would hear discussed, and from all such things she would fly with the wings of raging despair. This is not to be received as a figure of speech. Old Betty Higden, however tired, however footsore, would start up and be driven away by her awakened horror of falling into the hands of charity.

"It is a remarkable Christian improvement to have made a pursuing fury of the good Samaritan, but it was so in this case, and it is a type of many."

Two incidents united to intensify the old unreasoning abhorrence: these I must condense. The dead faintness came over her in a market-place, and when consciousness returned some women were supporting her. She was too weak to stand, until some man in the crowd proposed the Union, and then her fading energies came back and she would press on. Then again, at the side of a canal the deadness returned, and when she was recovered she left her few loose coins with the man in the lock-house to pay him for not delivering her over to the authorities.

Now to go on with the text.

"She was gone out of the lock-house as soon as he gave her permission, and her tottering steps were on the road again. But, afraid to go back and afraid to go forward, she struck off by side ways among which she got bewildered and lost. That night she took refuge from the Samaritan, in his latest accredited form, under a farmer's rick. The morning found her afoot again, but fast declining as to the clearness of her thoughts, though not as to the steadiness of her purpose. Comprehending that her strength was quitting her, and that the struggle of her life was almost ended, she could neither reason out the means of getting back to her protectors, nor even form the idea.

"The overwhelming dread, and the proud stubborn resolution it engendered in her to die undegraded, were the two distinct impressions left in her failing mind. Supported only by a sense that she was bent on conquering in her life-long fight, she went on.

"The time was come, now, when the wants of this little life were passing from her. She could not have swallowed food, though a table had been spread for her in the next field. The day was cold and wet, but she scarcely knew it. She crept on, poor soul, like a criminal afraid of being taken, and felt little beyond the terror of falling down while it was yet daylight, and being found alive. She had no fear that she would live through another night. Sewn in the breast of her gown, the money to pay for her burial was still intact. If she could wear through the day, and then lie down to die under cover of the darkness, she

would die independent. If she were captured previously the money would be taken from her. As a pauper she had no right to it, and she would be carried to the workhouse. So, keeping to by-ways, and shunning human approach, this troublesome old woman hid herself, and fared on all through the dreary day.

" Yet so unlike was she to vagrant hiders in general, that sometimes, as the day advanced, there was a bright fire in her eyes, and a quicker beating at her feeble heart, as though she said exultingly, ' The Lord will see me through it.' Faring on and hiding, hiding and faring on, the poor harmless creature, as though she were a murderer and the whole country were up after her, wore out the day and gained the night. ' Water, meadows, and such like,' she had sometimes murmured in the day's pilgrimage, when she had raised her head and taken note of the real objects about her.

" There now arose in the darkness a great building, full of lighted windows. Between her and the building lay a piece of water in which the lighted windows were reflected, and on its nearest margin was a plantation of trees. ' I humbly thank the Power and the Glory,' said Betty Higden, holding up her withered hands, ' that I have come to my journey's end.' She crept among the trees to the trunk of a tree, whence she could see beyond some intervening trees and branches the lighted windows. She placed her orderly little basket at her side, and sank upon the ground, supporting herself against the tree. It brought to her mind the foot of the Cross, and she committed herself to Him who died upon it.

" Her strength held out to enable her to arrange the letter in her breast, so that it could be seen that she had a paper there. It had held out for this, and it departed when this was done. ' I am safe here,' was her last benumbed thought. ' When I am found dead at the foot of the Cross, it will be by some of my own sort; some of the workpeople who work among the lights yonder. I cannot see the lighted windows now, but they are there. I am thankful for all.' The darkness gone, and a face bending down. It is as the face of a woman shaded by a quantity of rich dark hair. It is the earnest face of a woman who is young and handsome. But all is over with her on earth, and this must be an angel. ' Have I been long dead ? '

" ' I don't understand what you say. Let me wet your lips again.'

" ' Am I not dead ? '

" ' I cannot understand what you say. Your voice is so low and broken that I cannot hear you. Do you hear me ? '

" ' Yes.'

" ' Do you mean yes ? '

" ' Yes.'

" ' I was coming from my work just now, along the path outside, and I heard a groan, and found you lying here.'

" ' What work, deary ? '

" ' Did you ask what work ? At the paper-mill.'

" ' Where is it ? '

" ' Your face is turned up to the sky, and you can't see it. Dare I lift you ? '

" ' Not yet.'

" ' Not even lift your head to get it on my arm ? I will do it by very gentle degrees. You shall hardly feel it.'

" ' Not yet. The paper. The letter.'

" ' This paper in your breast ? '

" ' Bless ye ! '

" ' Let me wet your lips again. Am I to open it ? To read it ? '

" ' Bless ye ! '

" She reads it with surprise, and looks down with a new expression and an

added interest on the motionless face she kneels beside. 'I know these names. I have heard them often.'

"'Will you send it, my dear?'

"'I cannot understand you. Let me wet your lips again and your forehead. These. Oh, poor thing, poor thing!'

"These words through her fast-dropping tears. 'What was it that you asked me? Wait till I bring my ear quite close.'

"'Will you send it, my dear?'

"'Will I send it to the writers? Is that your wish? Yes, certainly.'

"'You'll not give it up to anyone but them?'

"'No.'

"'As you must grow old in time, and come to your dying hour, my dear, you'll not give it up to anyone but them?'

"'No, most solemnly.'

"'Never to the parish!' with a convulsed struggle.

"'No, most solemnly.'

"'Nor let the parish touch me, nor yet so much as look at me!' with another struggle.

"'No, faithfully.'

"A look of thankfulness and triumph lights the worn old face. The eyes which have been darkly fixed upon the sky turn with meaning in them towards the compassionate face from which the tears are dropping, and a smile is on the aged lips as they ask:

"'What is your name, my dear?'

"'My name is Lizzie Hexam.'

"'I must be sore disfigured. Are you afraid to kiss me?'

"The answer is the ready pressure of her lips upon the cold but smiling mouth.

"Bless ye! Now lift me, my love.'

"Lizzie Hexam very slowly raised the weather-stained, grey head, and lifted her as high as Heaven."

There are many other good points in Dickens's writings which might be enlarged upon, such as their purity and healthy-mindedness, the invariable triumph of good over evil, but I should like to touch upon one or two general objections which have been made to them. First their seeming exaggeration.

Now this exaggeration does not lie in his artistic fancies; his descriptive pieces are true and lifelike as any painted picture. It doesn't lie in his broad effects. We cannot feel-looking at his books as a whole—that the great wrongs, with their influences, which he delineated, have been exaggerated. It is when he comes to individual sketches that the fault is found. We have, as I said before, correct outlines, faultless perspective, with sometimes, what at first looks like deep and rather extra colouring. But I think it is a question as to whether these pictures would have caught the eye of the nation and held it, as they did, if the colours had been toned down and etherealised-off into a hazy mysticism. There are very few nations whose reading class, taken as a whole, would comprise a literary majority. Dickens was essentially a writer for the people:

for that class of whose cause he was the lifelong advocate : and though the intellectual triumphs of his works won for him many laurels from the higher classes, yet he never arranged his plots or moulded his characters to impress a noble fancy or beguile an aristocratic leisure. He wrote for the child-mind of the nation ; and as in children's picture-books the lamb must have a great deal of wool and the fox a very long tail to convince them at once this is a lamb and that is a fox, so Mr. Pecksniff was made the impersonation of nothing but meanness and selfishness, Harold Skimpole was an utter drone, and Jonas Chuzzlewit had no redeeming feature.

I have tried to say this as a reason for what is generally accepted as exaggeration in Dickens. I myself do not see much which deserves that name. The next objection, and one I cannot altogether answer, is Dickens's graphic sketches of religious hypocrisy. His Chadband and Stiggins have touched not only the susceptible self-righteousness of men with whom they might very distantly have shaken hands, but the better feelings of others, who think that something like mockery was intended of what they justly hold in deepest reverence. No one can for a moment believe that Charles Dickens ever intended to be irreverent, or had the remotest thought of casting the shadow of a slur on the religion which actuated him all through life, and wholly possessed him during the later years. He hated, with a whole-souled, righteous hatred, hypocrisy in any form in connection with anything ; and the more injurious he thought its effect the greater was his abhorrence of it, the more vivid his delineation, the more extreme his caricature.

I think the following letter, written to his son when he was leaving for Australia, will give a true idea of his feeling on this subject :

"I write this note to-day because your going away is much upon my mind, and because I want you to have a few parting words from me to think of now and then at quiet times. I need not tell you that I love you dearly, and am very sorry in my heart to part with you. But this life is half made up of partings, and these pains must be borne. It is my comfort and sincere conviction that you are going to try the life for which you are best fitted. What you have always wanted until now has been a set, steady, constant purpose. I therefore exhort you to persevere in a thorough determination to do whatever you have to do as well as you can do it. Never take a mean advantage of anyone in any transaction, and never be hard upon people who are in your power. Try and do to others as you would have them do to you, and do not be discouraged if they fail sometimes. It is much better for you that they should fail in obeying the greatest rules laid down by our Saviour than that you should. I put a New Testament among your books for the very same reasons, and with the very same hopes, that made me write an easy account of it for you when you were a little child ; because it is the best book that ever was or will be known in the world, and because it teaches you the best

lessons by which any human creature, who tries to be truthful and faithful to duty, can possibly be guided. As your brothers have gone away, one by one, I have written to each such words as I am now writing to you, and have entreated them all to guide themselves by this book, putting aside the interpretations and inventions of men. You will remember that at home you have never been harrassed about religious observances or *mére* formalities. I have always been anxious not to weary my children with such things before they are old enough to form opinions respecting them. You will, therefore, understand the better that I now most solemnly impress upon you the truth and beauty of the Christian religion as it came from Christ Himself, and the impossibility of your going far wrong if you humbly and heartily respect it.

“Only one thing more on this head.

“The more we are in earnest as to feeling it, the less we are disposed to hold forth about it. Never abandon the wholesome practice of saying your own private prayers, night and morning. I have never abandoned it myself, and I know the comfort of it.”

They who most intimately knew Dickens say that every word there is written from his heart, and is radiant with the truth of his nature.

Again, in answer to a letter from a clergyman, he says: “I beg to thank you for your letter. There cannot be many men, I believe, who have a more humble veneration for the New Testament, or a more profound conviction of its all-sufficiency, than I have. If I am ever (as you tell me I am) mistaken on this subject, it is because I discountenance all obtrusive professions of, and tradings in, religion, as one of the main causes why real Christianity has been retarded in this world, and because my observation of life induces me to hold in unspeakable dread and horror those unseemly squabbles about the *letter* which drive the spirit out of hundreds of thousands.” Then again, when a reader of “*Edwin Drood*” had accused him of irreverently quoting a line of Scripture, he says, denying the charge: “I am truly shocked that any reader could make the mistake. I have always striven in my writings to express veneration for the life and lessons of our Saviour, because I feel it. But I have never made proclamation of this from the housetops.” At the end of his last will and testament he says: “I commit my soul to the mercy of God, through our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and I exhort my dear children humbly to try to guide themselves by the teachings of the New Testament in its broad spirit, and to put no faith in any man's narrow construction of its letter here and there.”

Now all this, though it may not have proved Dickens to have thought as the majority here may think, must prove him to be actuated by good and pure motives. In conclusion I will give the words of Dean Stanley, spoken after Dickens's death, in Westminster Abbey. “He whom we mourn was the friend of mankind, a philanthropist in the true sense, the friend of youth, the friend of the poor, the enemy of

every form of meanness and oppression. I am not going to attempt to draw a portrait of him. Men of genius are different from what we suppose them to be. They have greater pleasures and pains, greater affections and greater temptations than the generality of mankind, and they can never be altogether understood by their fellow-men. But we feel that a light has gone out, and the world is dark to us, when they depart. He whose loss we now mourn occupied a greater space than any other writer in the minds of Englishmen during the last thirty-three years. We read him, talked about him, acted him, we laughed with him, we were roused by him to a consciousness of the misery of others, and to a pathetic interest in human life. Works of fiction, indirectly, are the great instructors of this world ; and we can hardly exaggerate the debt of gratitude which is due to a writer who has led us to sympathise with those good, true, sincere, honest English characters of ordinary life, and to laugh at the egotism, the hypocrisy, the false respectability of religious professors and others. To another great humourist who lies in this church the words have been applied, that his death eclipsed the gaiety of nations. But of him who has recently been taken, I would rather say that no one was ever so much beloved or so much mourned."

A. D.



SONNET.

Oh thou to whom it hath been giv'n to know
 All things which chiefly long'd to know the wise,
 Who know'st of Love far more than mothers' eyes
 Revealed to us in childhood long ago,
 Say ! what is that which we call Life below,
 Which fades as clouds fade from the summer skies,
 The while we wonder what beyond them lies ?
 And is that Joy for which we struggle so ?
 Thou, who no more requirest ears to hear,
 Nor eyes to see, nor tongue to speak, oh, say
 How went it with thee ? Was the journey drear ?
 And were there tracks to guide thee on thy way
 To Wisdom ? Tell us : art thou far or near,
 Thou little child who diedst yesterday ?

LENA MILMAN.

S A B R I N A.

I.

ON a July evening, when the last flush of rose-colour had passed away and left a still opaline clearness above the horizon, two friends sat on a rough seat beneath a group of lime trees.

They were not lovers ; far from it ; yet Patience Fothergil and John Burton had been lovers in a dead and buried past, and the Patience, sitting there with silver threads in her hair and a few wrinkles about eyes and mouth, was no more like the bright-haired, blossom-faced girl of twenty years ago, than was the anxious-looking, hard-featured solicitor, to the eager youth, in whose blue eyes hope had shone clear, as he faced the world, soul and body erect. His head was bowed thoughtfully enough now, and care had bent him towards the earth.

I, Patience, had not blamed him in the after years ; nay, perhaps had learned to be glad of it ; but I must confess that, at the time, it hurt me sorely when John told me that I was too strong-minded for him, that his ideal was now a soft, feminine woman, glad to lean meekly on her husband, and without thought beyond her home. Then he quoted some dreadful lines from Milton. We had been quarrelling, and I said :

“ That will do, John ; our lives lie apart from this moment.”

He was startled ; had not supposed me so ready to take him at his word ; perhaps had thought to pare me down to his ideal, save the mark ! But no entreaties could bring us together again ; that speech of his had killed my love for him as effectually as if he had given me a blow.

My cousin Margery is his wife now—soft and feminine, and undecided as Milton’s Eve, and as aggravating as that lady must have been when she reached middle age. I am sorry to say that her eight boys have much more of Cain than of Abel in their composition. Their father is much from home and their mother is weak ; therefore they are much more obnoxious than men in miniature generally are. I do not say it gladly, I only state a fact.

When Margery came to me, six months after John and I had parted, and told me, blushing and smiling, that she was engaged to him, I congratulated her most sincerely.

We had kept up a constant correspondence after their marriage and departure for Trinidad, where John had an appointment ; but we had never met again till this summer, when John had settled down near Shrurton, and bought a pretty house with nine or ten acres of ground, including the walled garden in which we were sitting, with no more romance in either of us than there was in the green peaches and apricots nailed to the south wall.

"So you return to Paris at the end of next month, Patience? I wish I could persuade you to remain with us."

I thought of my young cousins and stifled that hope promptly, not having the smallest rudiment of missionary feeling towards those young savages.

"No, thank you, John. My income is small, as you know, and I eke it out by giving lessons."

"But we could arrange about that. The boys are sadly in want of a firm hand over them, and I am so much from home."

As he spoke a series of wild whoops filled the air, and six boys of various sizes rushed into the garden, dragging with them a young girl. They were now talking at the highest pitch of their by no means musical voices, and that was a very lofty altitude indeed. "Now, then, will you tell us what Cousin Miles was saying to you? You *shall* tell us, you know ——" This from a tall lad of fourteen.

"Yes, indeed! Nurse says you are nothing but a dependent," shrieked a small boy in knickerbockers; and so on, *ad libitum*. I could hear no reply from the girl, the uproar was too great.

"You have my final answer, John," I said. "Your dear boys are too much for my nerves."

"So they are for Margery's."

I should perhaps have spoken somewhat unwisely as to the necessity of reclining upon the couches we arrange for ourselves, but John sprang up and went towards the unruly crew, which fled at his approach like a covey of partridges. He did not return, and I could hear his voice in the house issuing orders that every boy should go to bed at once.

The girl, left alone in the gathering darkness, came slowly along the path between the roses and seringa bushes. She was sobbing with a weary, half-exhausted sound, like a child. I sat quite still, holding my breath till she came close to me; then I called her.

"Sabrina!"

She started violently. "Nervous," I said to myself. "I wish to speak to you, my dear," I added aloud.

She sat down beside me, silent for a while, tapping her foot restlessly on a clump of hen and chicken daisies: then she spoke.

"You heard those boys, Miss Fothergil? It is so hard to be patient!"

"Yes, my dear. But who is Cousin Miles?"

I could not see her face in the darkness, but she answered in a steady voice: "A distant cousin of Mamma's and Uncle John's. He was so good to us when she was dying; and we were so poor before Uncle John returned. He has just come here now."

I had guessed a love affair, but she spoke so simply that I changed my idea at once; of course he was an elderly cousin.

"Those boys ought not to behave so," I said.

"You are Aunt Margery's cousin, and I will not say any more

about them," returned Sabrina. "I should say too much perhaps, for I have eaten the apple that 'True Thomas' refused, I think," with an unsteady little laugh.

I will here confess that I had fallen in love, on the farther side of middle age, not with any masculine person, but with Sabrina Grace. I shall never forget the first time I saw her. I was reading Mrs. Browning's poem, 'Caterina to Camoens,' when Margery brought her to my room; I had not seen her before, for she had been away on a visit. I lifted my head from the line, 'sweetest eyes were ever seen,' and contradicted Mrs. Browning mentally as I looked into those before me; grey, centering into black, essence of sunlight and moonlight and all things ethereal. I loved them from that moment. Yes, she was lovely in spite of her sunburnt face; not with a regular loveliness, but with something beautifully imperfect.

It vexed me to see her worried by the boys, to hear their rude jests and taunts, and I thought out a plan which I now proposed to her: that she should come and live with me in Paris, and give lessons. She was delighted, for she was fond of me.

"Do you really mean it? Oh, how nice," and she clapped her hands. There was something childish about Sabrina, which I did not dislike.

"Think well before you decide," I said. "It is a hard life. You must be out early and late, in all weathers."

"But I am strong," she said. Then in a changed voice: "Aunt Margery will not like it."

I knew that, but I promised to settle it with John.

By this time the tide of darkness was full and the stars were scattered over the sky; so we walked slowly towards the house, a model on a small scale of an English country house, with its smooth lawn, from which the buttercups and daisies had been ruthlessly banished. It sloped down to a dimpling brook, which flowed with a hushed purr in the darkness. I thought of the waters of Shiloah, that go softly. Such meditations—indeed any meditations—were impossible during the day in that neighbourhood: for did not crooked pins dance in its waters, and dirt pies soil its clearness from morn till eve, while a troop of urchins sported like juvenile Satyrs on its brink?

The water slid along, and my thoughts flowed on through the years to come, wherein the girl by my side should be as a daughter to me, playing Ruth to my Naomi, with no interrupting Boaz, I hoped.

Margery's voice cleft the silence like the thin edge of a wedge. "Patience, where are you? Oh, here you are! Will you come in to supper. Oh! Sabrina, I didn't see you"—this in a tone of extreme displeasure. "What were the dear boys doing that their papa should send them to bed?" she added.

I replied: "Your dear boys were behaving like savages, Margery.

If they could feel the rein and the rod a little oftener, some lives might be more peaceful!" Which outburst on my part might be rude, but was not unprovoked. My cousin burst into tears. How some women weep! It is like the wringing of a wet knitted garment; the dropping seems endless.

"I am sure," she said between little gasps: for she is cushiony, as if she had swallowed gallons of feathers: "I am sure," she said, "it is very painful to think that all our relations have a prejudice against the boys. Better boys never existed. Even Sabrina is against them, and I thought she would be such a help to me. They only want gentleness."

I thought of a scene I had witnessed only that morning in the schoolroom. Sabrina was sitting at a table trying to keep from crying, but with scarlet cheeks and quivering lips, holding down a boy on each side. At a smaller table a couple more had spilt the ink; a third pair had brought in a paper box of butterflies, and were busy practising vivisection. The last set of boys were still in the chrysalis stage of nursery life, or doubtless they would have added their quota to the general misbehaviour.

In the midst of the din, Margery looked in. "Can't you manage with less noise, Sabrina?—No, I will not have them complained of," and she closed the door and went down to the quiet, flower-scented drawing-room to finish a sofa rug in soft wools.

I had heard all this, and I came in from my room and boxed their ears all round, at the same time giving them my opinion of their conduct.

I thought, I say, of this scene, and sooner than I should otherwise have done, I spoke my wish. "This child is looking ill; let her come to Paris with me. I will give her food and house-room, and lessons to provide for the rest."

"But John will not like his niece to give lessons."

"In the name of goodness what is she doing in this house? Those boys are wearing her out, body and soul."

"But what shall I do with the boys?"

I could have shaken the selfish little woman.

"Send Jack, Bob, and Harry to school, and get a governess with some authority about her to teach the others."

"Cousin Miles must be consulted," she said, as we went in together.

Sabrina had slipped away at the beginning of our conversation. We had dined early, and supper was laid in the dining-room, the hangings and furniture of which were of a warm brown. The table was pretty enough with its white drapery, its lamps and flowers, and heaps of strawberries and cherries on green leaves, spiritualising, as it were, the grosser parts of the feast. Margery has good taste; I will say that in her favour.

Leaning against the window at the farther end of the room was a young man, who turned as we entered.

"This is Cousin Miles," said Margery, by way of introduction ; and my heart sank. They have a bad habit in that family of alluding to unknown persons as if others knew all about them ; so I had been picturing to myself a relative—rich, elderly, and rotund—who took a fatherly interest in *Sabrina*. The reality was a man of not more than seven-and-twenty, light-haired, yet with glowing black eyes, that seemed to penetrate the thoughts of the person they looked at. He was clean shaven, except for a heavy moustache; there was a faint tinge of Bohemianism about him, though he was quietly dressed in grey, like any other gentleman. He was an artist, and perhaps that accounted for it.

Shrubton has some fine scenery in its neighbourhood, and our young artist had come to feed his growing fame by closer communion with nature. He had taken lodgings in the town, so he was free to come and go as he liked.

He did not talk much at first, nor did we. The stillness was growing dreamy, when Miles spoke.

"Well, *Sabrina*, will you sit to me ? "

He was evidently repeating a former request. She looked towards Margery, who frowned.

"I will see what John says" (John had gone out), "but I thought you came to paint from nature."

"Just so ; and here I find the best piece of nature for my purpose."

He was too much in earnest to mean a compliment.

"You would not mind, *Sabrina* ?" and he turned to her with a smile.

"Of course you may paint her, Miles, after all your kindness—only there are the dear children's lessons."

He blushed and looked annoyed as he rose to go, but only remarked : "Then, *Sabrina*, we shall begin to-morrow morning, if that will suit you."

"Oh yes, Miles," she replied eagerly.

"That's a dear girl," he said heartily. "John is sure to say yes." And bidding us good-night, he went, meditating on his picture without a thought as to the personality of his model, to my great relief. Perhaps it was selfish, but I did so want *Sabrina*.

II.

MILES came and went. He had been allowed the use of a large garret, and thither, when the spiders, who had lived in that gloomy domain till they thought it their own, had been expelled, he brought his easel and improvised a platform for his model. The windows were arranged for the light, and near one of them I sat and made pretence to work ; not that they needed looking after, but I liked to watch the picture and *Sabrina*. The subject was Dante Rossetti's "Blessed Damosel."

Sabrina stood on a platform, dressed in a long, straight robe of some shimmering white stuff, which Miles had given her; her long hair was loose over her shoulders.

She looked the poem, for she felt it, and the meaning grew upon her till once or twice her tears fell.

"Beautiful," cried Miles. "Sabrina, fancy yourself on the verge of heaven, and myself the fellow you are grieving for."

In his enthusiasm he sometimes forgot that his model was mortal. I told him so one day.

"Poor little girl," said he, penitently; "do tell me when you are tired." But she never did: indeed she assured me that the garret was a haven of rest after "those boys."

One morning I looked up from my work and caught an expression on her face which startled me. She was looking at the painter with a tender yearning in her eyes and lovely sorrowful lines round her mouth. Of this she was profoundly unconscious; so was he. A fragrance filled the gloom of the quiet place; it came from the lilies on her arm. She had gathered them early, with the dew on them.

At noon we paused and came down from artistic heights to luncheon, which had been brought to us at my request. The rapt look passed from Sabrina's face. The artist saw the change, but the man did not perceive the cause.

"What a splendid actress you would make, Sabrina," said he, eyeing her critically.

"What do you mean, Miles?"

"You transform yourself so completely! You will make me famous."

She never thought that it would be her face and form that the world would gaze at; nor did he, for he lived but for his art, a goddess austere to so many, but to him kind as Dian to Endymion. As for Sabrina—well, it is no new thing; the skiff of her soul was anchored against a shore dangerous but beautiful, in a land where "it seems always afternoon," so mellow is the light, so soft the air.

Sabrina was not yet fully grown to her womanhood, and perhaps it was just as well that Miles did not notice that he had disturbed the balance of her nature. So a veil hung between them: and I longed for the picture to be finished lest it should be torn away.

I thought once that the revelation had come. Margery had gone on a round of calls with John, and the picture being well on, we had taken a holiday and stolen out through the fields, where the great ox-eye daisies flung themselves against our knees, and so on to the river into which the brook flowed. Here we found a bower formed by trails of ivy, that hung like a curtain between wild cherry trees.

The boys had happily been occupied with a rat hunt in the stables, so we were alone. Miles read us "The Stream's Secret." We read a good deal of Rossetti just then.

I was sorry he chose that, for it was a voice to articulate what was to her as vague as the music of the reed before Pan blew into it.

"The very ways where now we walk apart."

He paused. Sabrina was looking into the river with wistful eyes and lips covered with her hand ; her breath deepened into a sigh. I hoped Miles would not look at her. If only—a shower of leaves descended with a chorus of elfish laughter.

"Here we are again ! Stolen a march on you. Ha, ha !"

Three of the boys had run on before us and hidden themselves in the trees. Miles sprang up and sent them away ; they went grumbling, and we were once more at peace. But the spell was broken ; we read no more, but talked instead ; at least, Miles and I did. For the first, and as yet for the last time, I was glad to see and hear those boys.

III.

THE picture, the bright summer weather, the cool gloom of our garret, the white lilies, John, Margery, and those boys, even Miles, had faded into the background : for the fresh September days had brought Sabrina and myself to my doll's apartment in Paris.

There are thousands of such tiny nests scattered through Paris, where newly-married couples, old maids and widows, may live and even sweeten life with many small pleasures.

My house consisted of three rooms and a very small kitchen ; a kitchen in the bud, as it were, for it was a tight fit for two slender persons.

The three rooms opened into each other, the one in the centre being our sitting-room. This latter I had made into a gem of prettiness, for I could afford some small luxuries. The carpet was soft and green, to imitate moss ; the sofa and chairs were easy, meet for tired limbs ; the curtains were green, with a tracery of red-brown vine-leaves to match the walls. In the window was a stand of wild ferns, with a scarlet geranium in the midst, which filled the eye like a flame amid the quietness of its surroundings. A wire basket hung above this, filled with smaller ferns and long trails of ivy, which were reflected in the mirror opposite.

In the bedrooms we had Indian matting and soft rugs ; there were silk "edredons" on the beds, and writing tables with a plant on each.

One half of the kitchen was filled by a tiled fireplace, in whose square holes we were adepts at lighting charcoal fires. We had a "femme de ménage" who was supposed to come and prepare our meals, but woe to the person who puts faith in a "femme de ménage." So we often put on gloves and lighted our charcoal for our *café-au-lait*. Our good concierge (an exception to the rule) would often bring our dinner from a neighbouring restaurant.

It was not always pleasant weather, and in the depth of winter we often came home damp and tired. But there was the evening, with its cosy meal, and the lounge by the sparkling wood fire heaped on the hearth between the dogs ; the black coffee, best modern substitute for nectar, the last Tauchnitz volume, and the talk which often lasted into the small hours.

Sometimes we went to the theatre ; sometimes we had little receptions, mostly of women, when we tried to keep the talk from getting narrow by mixing it with music and games.

For a time I was perfectly happy, for *Sabrina* was joyous ; but it was only for a time.

When the spring came she began to droop, and the doctor ordered change for both of us. So we put our lessons aside for a while and went to Braie, a tiny village near St. Germain, pleasantly embowered in apple and pear trees.

Our lodging was in a farm-house, whence we could look down the green aisles of the forest. On fine days we sat on the mossy carpet beneath the trees, looking up through the swaying branches to a heaven whose blue was subdued by little white clouds. But one April day dawned when the ground was covered with snow and the trees shivered in the icy wind.

Before this *Sabrina* had been brighter and stronger ; but on this desolate day she resumed her mental solitude and took to reading Thomas à Kempis. In answer to my remonstrances she remarked : "I love no one now, not even you, dear ; my heart is dead ; only duty remains ; that must be enough for me."

"Your duty is to get well and amuse yourself," I retorted, glancing at the pile of really good novels, some of which had brought smiles to her lips during the past days.

"Oh ! those books are frivolous," said she. "Let me read you some of this, Miss Patience."

I assented, and she read on till she came to the eighth chapter : "Converse not much with young people and strangers Be not familiar with any woman, but in a general way commend all good women to God."

I became cross. "What can one expect from an old monk but that he should despise women ? Depend upon it, my dear, it is best for men and women to meet, aye, and love each other. Take it for all in all, marriage is the noblest life, if you meet with the right person. Of course all hangs upon that *if* ! I think it was better for Adam to fall with Eve, than to live on in Eden a hermit."

"But is not renunciation always right ?"

"For those who have a superfluity of anything to renounce. Now put away your very good book till you have done your share in renouncing the world, the flesh, and the devil, having bravely fought them all."

Was it my speech which had brought life and colour to *Sabrina*'s

face, as Thomas à Kempis slipped from her lap and she passed from a nun into a woman?

IV.

I LOOKED round involuntarily, and in the doorway stood Miles, with a mischievous smile on his sunburnt face. How very welcome he was, to be sure!

"Having fought them all," he repeated. "Now, I wonder who they can be? Ah! I know: Margery's naughty boys."

"No, I said, half vexed; "the world, the flesh, and the devil—more terrible opponents even than those naughty boys."

He laughed, and Sabrina, with her hand lingering in his, laughed too.

I looked out of the window. One of those sudden changes which take place in April had come over the weather; the greyness had passed into a mellow afternoon tint, a warm wind was melting the snow. Within, they two stood, with the air of people awakening from a dream.

"Sabrina, sit down. She has been ill, Mr. Grace. Didn't Margery tell you? She has corresponded with you, I know." Sabrina's face had lost its glow and grown pale again.

"No; Margery said nothing about it. What has been the matter?" said he, softly leaning towards her.

"Only weakness, but it is nearly over now," with a long breath, as of one laying down a burden.

Miles stayed, talking of the winter. We did not know that he had spent it in Egypt, at which he seemed vexed. We walked back part of the way to St. Germain with him, and in the middle of the long chestnut avenue, facing the château, we said goodbye. I shook hands with him and turned to go, but they lingered.

Sabrina had in her hand a few violets, and he asked her for them. There are a few faults without which a woman cannot well get on; one of these is coquetry. At this period Sabrina was absolutely lacking in it. The stupid girl actually never caught the look with which he made his request, though I do not believe she saw the violets very distinctly. I perceived all this, however, out of the corner of my eye.

"These?" said she; "they are not very fresh; I have been holding them in my hand; but you may have them if you like," and she put a few leaves with them.

As she gave them to him, he touched her hands with his lips, then with a look of pain I could not understand, he walked rapidly away. Sabrina fell into a fit of musing, as she walked beside me. She was again standing by that mysterious stream, whose ripples touched her very feet. For some days after this I sat and watched her icy sweetness expand into that warm and fragrant blossom which we call by so many names. We read and we talked, but never once of Miles; he was too near our thoughts for that.

He did not come to see us for a good while, and I, at least, was disappointed. There is nothing specially attractive to a young man in the society of an elderly female, so there might be no special inducement in me; but he might have come, I thought, to see the rare beauty that he had evoked in my young companion.

His absence told upon Sabrina. Elaine, you will remember, died because Launcelot had no heart to give her in return for hers; but this girl, instead of dying, would become morose and ascetic, if her heart were left empty. I saw it every hour. She was constantly saying little sharp things to me, then begging my pardon.

On the sixth evening of this she sat by the window, peering out into the darkness of the forest, where the trees were sighing and moaning as if their old nymphs had returned, and were bewailing their old haunts, like Jephtha's daughter on the mountains of Gilead.

"Child, for whom are you looking?" I could not help saying, though it was unkind of me.

"For whom should I be looking?" she said, crossly.

"Oh, I was only joking."

"There is nothing to joke about, and no one I care to see, and you know it!" she added, with unnecessary vehemence, for she was literally aching with excitement. Suddenly she burst out: "I wonder, Miss Patience ——" Then stopping as suddenly, she threw herself down beside me, and burst into bitter tears. I let her cry on; she had been very naughty, and if she had been a child I should have scolded her.

A movement near made me look up. There stood her cousin, gazing at her with a certain mixture of surprise and gladness, for which I could not account, but the cause of which was really, that the young woman beside me was by no means perfect; indeed was at that moment manifestly a repentant sinner. He was like the rest of us, and preferred fellow-sinners to those persons who never do any wrong.

"Have you been cross, little cousin?"

To be told she is cross is what no woman out of a "memoir" can endure, so Sabrina sprang up with flaming cheeks and flashing eyes.

"I do so object to bad manners! It is usual to knock at a door."

To this he answered gently that he had knocked three times, and thought that he heard an invitation to enter.

"You are very welcome, Miles," I interposed. "We thought you would have come before."

"Speak for yourself, dear," said Sabrina; "he is welcome to stay away for ever, as far as I am concerned."

Miles grew angry at this.

"What has come to you? Is this the gentle girl I have known so long?"

"Miles, be quiet," I implored.

"There is no need," cried Sabrina, as she swept out of the room.

He looked ruefully after her ; the enemy had fled, but the victor felt vanquished.

“What shall I do ?” said he. “I did not mean to hurt her.”

“She behaved very badly to you—but ——”

“But what ?”

“I think she cares for you ; I am sure she has felt your absence all these days.”

I knew that I was treading on dangerous ground ; meddling, in fact. Sabrina had not made a confidante of me ; I was only guessing by signs and tokens, and they might be wrong. As for him, I had only seen his looks. Added to this, I had a pretty shrewd guess as to where Sabrina was ; for the farmer’s wife was entertaining some gossips in the kitchen ; it was too wet to go out, and we had only two rooms. Consequently she must be in our bedroom, and the partition was so thin that anything above a whisper in the one room could not possibly be unheard in the other. After a silence, during which I had begun devoutly to wish that I had not interfered, Miles looked up, his countenance all aglow. The fumes of the new wine of love had evidently reached his brain. I hastened to administer a draught of the cold water of uncertainty. “But I am not sure that I am right—I really do not know—she has not been strong lately.”

His face fell.

“And you, Miles ?” I said.

“I love her as I can never love again,” he cried passionately ; “but I am afraid.”

His silence after this held one at least of his listeners in tension. What was it ? had he a wife already, and one of whom he was ashamed ? Had he done some wrong in the past ? What was it ?—for I saw that he had something to disclose or confess. I was quite ready to listen.

“Look at this,” said he, opening a parcel and displaying a small picture in the lamplight.

It was a half-length of an exquisitely beautiful girl, just passing from bud to flower. She was dressed in Eastern fashion, with a profusion of gauze about her, and the usual gold coins on her black hair and slender neck. The large eyes flooded the face with that sweetness, melting into melancholy, only to be seen in an Oriental countenance. No one could have looked on the original without yearning, no man without love of some sort. Miles took up another rather larger canvas and showed it me. The same girl wrapped in soft drapery, that mingled with the flow of the Nile. The afternoon sun shone through a mesh of palm-trees, the sun of a land where he is lord of every tint and odour.

I looked at him. “Miles,” I said, “what does this mean ? How dare you come here to disturb her peace—you are married ?”

“No, no,” he cried, “not so bad as that.”

“Where is she ?” pointing to the picture.

"Gone to her own place."

"A harem?"

"She is dead," he said, earnestly. "That is a sketch for a larger picture."

"And you come to ask us to share your grief?"

"No," he cried. "How can you wrong me so? Indeed, I never loved her. I will tell you all about it, if you will listen."

"I am all attention," I replied; and he began.

"Four months ago we were at a place called Asyoot, on the Nile: a friend and I, that is to say. Considine is not a bad fellow, though he is only an amateur and daubs fearfully: we got on very well together. Asyoot is a dry dusty hole in the daytime, with white walls and deep shadows. In the sunset it appears like Paradise, though morally it is the very reverse. Considine fell into mischief and I went to help him out and got into trouble myself, seeing this girl among the dancers."

"You fell in love with her?"

"No, indeed; but she—well, she did with me, while I was painting her. Don't laugh, please."

"I was not laughing I assure you."

"Some one was."

"No, no; go on."

"I was horrified. She fell ill, and when she seemed dying I bought her."

"Bought her!"

"Yes, it seemed the best thing to do. Her people were only too glad to be rid of her, and I took her to a convent which was not far off, meaning to leave her there to be educated if she recovered. I did not want to marry her. When we returned from the cataracts she was really dying, of low fever they said. Well, she died."

"What else?"

"After we had left her at the convent we went up the river. The whole land is asleep, and the spirit of the landscape lulled me into repose; I was content to remember Zenobi; the future was dim as a dream. I scarcely touched a brush."

"Lotus-eating?"

"Yes. In this state I fell asleep one noon, when there was not a breath of air to stir the plumes of the palms, and the very crocodiles had hidden their ugly snouts. I dreamt that I was still on the boat but it was evening, and the air was full of that soft primrose light of which I longed to reproduce the transparent clearness. On the shore stood Zenobi, with kisses hovering on her lips as she bent towards me with outstretched hands. Far above in the blue was Sabrina, just as I had painted her in my picture. I cried to her across space, but she did not answer. I knew then that I loved her. The girl below faded away, and I awoke."

"But what should you have done with Zenobi if she had lived?"

"I should not have married her. Before I speak to Sabrina, will you tell her this?"

"But your love is the child of a dream."

"No," he returned passionately. "The dream only awoke me to a sense of the reality."

"I will send her to you and you shall tell her yourself."

Of course I knew that Sabrina had heard every word. Perhaps, though—girls are so foolish—she would prefer the halting speech he would use towards her. So I went out into the passage and into our bedroom. There lay Sabrina, apparently fast asleep, with her hands folded under her hot cheek. I knew she was no more asleep than I was, but I did not dare to say anything; Miles would be sure to hear. So I went back to him, and told him he could not see her. He was sadly disappointed.

"I must go to England to-morrow about my pictures," he said. "Do not let her forget me, Miss Patience." And he wrung my hand.

V.

FORGET him! there was no fear of that. I saw it in her eye, heard it in the broken modulations of her voice, and was alternately tormented and charmed by her April moods. Petulance combined with tender caresses, naughtiness mingled with humility. Of these I was the recipient, the scapegoat, a mere lay figure, as it were, to try her various humours upon. As before, she never spoke of Miles; not even when we had returned to Paris, and Margery had taken rooms near us with three of the "dear boys," who attempted their old tyranny; but that I promptly put down. Margery was curious about Miles; she knew he had been in Paris, and had an inkling that he cared for Sabrina.

"I am always afraid he will marry some penniless girl, and that means ruin to a man like him; so unpractical, you know, like all artists."

This was said to Sabrina one evening when I was absent. It was petty of Margery, but weak women are apt to take small revenges.

So the days went on, till Sabrina and I, having a holiday, stole away for a drive in the forest of St. Germain, for once without Margery and the boys. We were in the early part of May; the air was soft and balmy, the grass waved fresh that afternoon, stirred by the fingers of little vagrant breezes. The birds sang madrigals to the great green forest, all dappled with golden sunshine and shifting shadows.

At St. Germain, after leaving the railway station, we took one of the roomy 'fiacres' and started for our drive, leaving care behind; at least I can answer for myself. I think an irritating consciousness about Miles disturbed Sabrina's contentment, as we drove along the woodland paths, so narrow in some places that the branches brushed our faces. Our destination was the "Couvent des Loges," in the heart of the forest; not that we wished to visit the convent, but to gather lilies of the valley. In Paris the flower-women were selling

them for a couple of sous the small bunch, but we wanted to find them in their native home, and they grew here scattered under the trees, acres on acres of them. We left our cab and gathered and admired, while our coachman on the box read his "Petit Journal."

I am not so young as I was, and the enthusiasm of youth departs with its vitality. So I soon grew tired, while Sabrina was still eager in her search for the white bells, coyly hidden beneath their green leaves. I sat down on a mossy stump at the foot of a great beech tree, the home of many a squirrel. My feet rested on sheaves of lilies, with the mould of last year's foliage lying about them.

How frail and gentle she looked, in her pale lavender dress, with ribbons of a shade that harmonised with the tones of her hair ! And how she harmonised with the afternoon, over which cool shadows were already creeping ! She had been talking and laughing merrily, but when her basket was full to the brim she threw herself at my feet, holding her face down to drink in the scent of her treasures.

"My dear," I remarked, apropos of nothing, only I wanted to read a little more of her romance if I could : "My dear, which do you prefer? these lilies or the tall ones with which Miles painted you?"

There was no answer to my remark, surely as innocent as the little birds overhead, or the flowers beneath our feet, but she turned upon me with scarlet cheeks.

"Oh ! how could you tell him I cared for him ! Oh ! how could you ! Oh ! my heart is broken, and you have done it."

All this in certainly heartbroken accents.

"It will mend, child ; it will mend. Wait till you see him again."

"I wish never to see him again. I do so wish I had never seen him at all."

"He came to ask you to marry him that night when you behaved like a little savage."

"Well, I shall never be his squaw. Aunt Margery told me that I should be a clog on him, and that he would marry me out of pity. I said only yesterday that I would never be his wife."

We rose when the girl's sobs were quieted, picked up our baskets, and made for a charcoal-burner's hut to get some milk.

Now in the old fairy tales, the prince always arrives in time to save the princess from some evil enchantment; so now our prince appeared through the trees, but let us hope that he generally met with a better reception than Sabrina gave Miles. I was not surprised to see him—he fitted in so well with the whole thing. He shook hands with me, then turned to her. She was busy with her mantle, and feigned not to see his hand.

"How did you find us out ?" I asked.

"Easily ; you told your concierge where you were going. My cab is at the cross, over yonder."

"I am very glad to see you," I said. "Will you come with us and get some milk ?"

"No, thank you. But will Sabrina come to me here, after she has had her milk?"

She looked vexed for a moment, then said: "I will stay now, and go for the milk after; only be quick, Miles." And she waited while I went on.

I sat in the charcoal-burner's hut, and drank milk and played with the black-eyed children in close white caps and wooden sabots, till the whole family must have been weary of me, but no Miles or Sabrina. At last I sallied forth.

In the meantime this is what went on in the little dell among the flowers and young green bracken. At least it is what I put together from the hints and allusions I afterwards picked up, and I believe it is tolerably correct.

He did not ask her to marry him at once. He was, as I have said, a good young man, but he had his faults; and I reckoned it to him for a fault that he found it natural that she should love him, instead of doubting and trembling as a lover should. To be sure I had given him to understand that he was dear to her, but then—And then he had a tinge of that pharisaism which sits not ill on a very young man, but which Providence soon knocks out of him if he is worth anything. Here was a specimen of arrogance—the last time he ever indulged in it, I am happy to say.

"Child, how could you refuse me before I asked you?"

It was cruel of him, and she burst into tears and shivered with emotion.

"Aunt Margery ——" she began.

"Yes; Aunt Margery told me you would not marry me if there were no one else in the world."

"I hate you, Miles; I am ashamed of you," she flashed through her tears. "How could you say that? I hate you, Miles."

She was not going to play beggar-maid to his king Cophetua, and she was quite right too. He said nothing, and she began to move silently away. Then after a pause, when her eyes were clear of the tears, she looked up at him as he walked beside her: there was a new look in his face, a hungry yearning touched with fear.

"What is it?" said she, startled.

He fell down on his knees before her, and catching her hands buried his face in them. She tried to withdraw them.

"I never really loved you till this moment! It is bitter, Sabrina! Have pity on me."

"What do you mean?" she asked, coldly. Poor soul; she was trying to prevent her tears from dropping on the bowed head, and her hands from trembling against his lips.

"You are right to hate me," he cried. "I have hurt you, and have turned your love away when you were learning to care for me."

At this moment he looked up, and her look fell downward into his like a flower thrown into a clear pool. That cleansing humility which

is part and parcel of love, nay its very essence, shone in his eyes ; joy also began to play in them.

"I am not worthy, Sabrina. And yet ——"

She could not turn her eyes away, she could not speak for a moment ; then the words dropped down into his ear.

"I love you, Miles," she whispered. Then by some occult law of gravitation her head bowed lower, their lips met, and the compact was settled for ever in one long "seal of love."

When I met them they were walking slowly into the depths of the forest, a still delight in their faces, and I said :

"The cab which brought us here must take us away from this enchanted wood. You can take your garden of Eden with you ; in spirit at least, young people."

"How can you be so ridiculous, Miss Patience ?" This from Sabrina, but in accents that trembled with emotion.

"Nay ; you are the hundred-millionth Adam and Eve. But we really must return to Paris."

"I believe you are as glad as we are, dear," said she, clinging to me as I gave them my blessing.

Most people think Miles's picture of Sabrina, as "Nymph of the Severn," a finer painting than the "Blessed Damosel," but I prefer the latter, perhaps because I saw it painted.

I see Miles and Sabrina often, but I miss my girl from my house. She is no longer my own, as I had hoped she would continue, though I rejoice at her happiness—"her full content as wife."

Oh, elderly friend of the weaker sex ! whenever a young woman says to you, "Where thou goest, &c.," after the manner of Ruth, do not place implicit confidence in the declaration, for, ten chances to one, Boaz is waiting for her in some cornfield by the way !

A ROMANTIC WEDDING.

A SOUTH WALES LEGEND.

By ANNE BEALE.

MOST of the ancient mansions of South Wales have their legends. Some of these relate to ghosts and fairies, others to romantic incidents marvellous as they. Before the steam-whistle shrieked amid the hills and vales, these traditions were religiously believed, not only by the illiterate and superstitious peasant, but by the more cultivated proprietor, and even in this nineteenth century many are loth to acknowledge them to be mere creations of distorted imagination.

A lady, since dead, gave the writer several strange stories which may not be without interest for readers curious in such details. She was born and died in one such old mansion, and herself put faith in the friends from whom she heard them, who in their turn believed in those who related them. Thus traditions descend from generation to generation, until we fail to eliminate the true from the false, the real from the ideal. We can only "tell the tale as it was told to us," which was, after all, much what Homer must have done in his "Iliad" and "Odyssey."

The following is not only certified but dated, and was received as "authorised" by the descendants of the heroine.

In the year 1724 a daughter and heiress was born to a Squire of high degree. But her birth cost the life of her mother. The chimes that had been set a-pealing in the old church tower as soon as the news spread that the infant drew breath, soon changed to the clang of the passing bell. All the villagers who were agape with delight one instant, cried "Lord have mercy on her soul" the next, and listened with silent awe as, minute by minute, eighteen solemn warnings fell from the iron tongue of the ruler of the belfry. "Gone! and not yet out of her teens!" cried the people. "What will the Squire do without her?"

The Squire consoled himself. Scarcely had twelve months rolled away, when the joy-bells pealed forth again, and he brought a second bride to his castle, and a step-mother to his pretty baby, Ermentrude.

Hitherto the child had been the sole joy of his heart, and the light of his lonely mansion; now, a proud and haughty dame ruled him and his dependents. The new wife looked with jealous eyes on the child of the old. "I will give to my lord a son who shall displace the puny infant," she said; but no son came.

For six weary years the stately lady's jealousy of the little Ermentrude and longing for children of her own lasted; but spite and hope

were equally vain. She alienated the child who would have loved her, and in punishment, God sent to her none of her own. Yet Ermentrude flourished as a flower beneath the fostering care of her nurse. If she hid herself at the sound of her step-mother's voice, what mattered? she was received in the sheltering arms of her faithful Betto, and consoled by toffee and sugar cakes.

The Squire, her father, was self-indulgent, and troubled himself not about such trifling matters. He had a handsome wife, an heiress, and a wine cellar—what could he want more? one child was enough for him, and his lady was careful not to display before him her antipathy for Ermentrude; so no disquieting suspicions disturbed his frequent potations. Nevertheless, they were disturbed. An adversary even more fatal than his wine cup overpowered him, and that enemy was Death.

The Squire died suddenly, and the child Ermentrude, at six years of age, was heiress of all his possessions. Save her dowry, the jealous wife had nothing.

Little did Ermentrude realize her position. She scarcely understood the loss she had sustained in her father. All she knew was, that instead of her step-mother's cold salutations, she was clasped in the arms of a loving uncle, her own mother's brother, who was constituted her guardian. "What should she know of death?" She looked with terror on her father's white face and rigid form, and piteously asked him to speak to her; she stood at her nursery window while the grand funeral procession wound through the park of which she was now mistress; and she sobbed out her childish grief on her fond nurse's bosom. But no sympathetic word reached her ear from the haughty lady who remained apart in her solitary chamber.

Scarcely was the father laid in the ancestral vault, before Ermentrude was told that a great change awaited her. She was to leave the castle and live with her uncle and guardian, the Squire of Plâs Gwen, at his place some thirty miles away. When Mistress Betto said she would accompany her, the child clapped her hands with delight, for had not her uncle embraced her tenderly and vowed that he loved her for her mother's sake? She paused not to consider whether he might prove a naughty uncle, like him of "The Babes in the Wood," or to enquire concerning his only son, who would inherit the castle if she were to die; she only thought of his kisses and assurances of affection.

Accordingly, preparations were made for her departure. All her childish toys were gathered together. A warm coat was put upon her Italian greyhound, a baize covering on her canary cage, and she was dressed in her sable hat and plume. At the last moment, her uncle took her to bid farewell to her father's widow. She found her in the profoundest of weeds, and shrank from the face, now unsoftened by fair curls, and the severe white cap that surmounted it.

"You will remain here, madam, so long as you may please," said

the uncle. "Ermentrude will live with us till her majority. Her property will accumulate. She will be the greatest heiress in Wales."

"Doubtless you have your schemes, sir. You have an only son," replied the lady.

"Yes, madam. I trust they may fancy one another," was the reply. "I shall hope to return here to complete the affairs when I have committed Ermentrude to my sister's care."

But the child understood nothing of this. She touched her stepmother's cold fingers, made her curtsey, and soon found herself in her own grand coach, drawn by four fine horses. Neither did she realize, as she left her ancestral home and drove through the fine park, that what she saw was hers. Her little hand was in her uncle's. Betto sat opposite; Bo-peep, her dog, was in her lap, and her canary at her side. She was happy. She was welcomed to her new abode by her mother's only sister, a stately widow, who lived with her uncle, a widower. Husbands and wives seemed strangely and early separated in her family. She was introduced to her cousin, a boy a few years her senior, from whom she shrank, as never having been accustomed to children. He, also, eyed her askance, and the commencement of their proposed courtship was not favourable. Still, they were intended for one another, and their elders nodded and smiled at this shyness, and said it would soon wear off. Mistress Betto looked on, and thought the match suitable enough, though she had her ideas concerning an alliance between cousins. "But maybe this one is made in heaven," she soliloquized afterwards.

The boy's name was Aubrey, and he soon became the slave of the imperious little maiden who shared his tasks and sports. He heard that she was to be his when they were old enough, together with her vast estates, and he was nothing loth. She, too, was made to understand that they were intended for one another. "Thou shalt not have me or my lands," she was wont to say; and to her nurse she would add: "In sooth Aubrey is a milksop, and I love him not. Besides, he is my cousin, and thou knowest, Betto, that I cannot marry one so near of kin." This, as she grew up to maidenhood.

"It progresses well, sister," whispered her uncle, aside.

"It is as it should be," replied Dame Dorothy, the aunt.

They were a cold and diplomatic pair. But Aubrey was, as Ermentrude declared, a milksop. He was but a vain and silly youth, and not one to win the heart of a high-spirited girl, such as she.

There was, however, a neighbouring knight who sometimes came to the Plás, whose secret suit sped better. Guardians, like love, are often blind, and the Squire bethought himself not that a maiden scarcely yet fifteen would be forward enough to fancy a man of one-and-twenty, or that his neighbour, Sir Tudor ap Griffith, would fall in love with a child. Yet so it was.

"I am going to the castle to-morrow to see after thy property,

Ermentrude," said the uncle, one morning. "I shall be absent two days. Aubrey will take care of thee and of Aunt Dorothy."

"I am fifteen, and can take care of myself, sir," replied the young lady, with a saucy curtsey. "Besides, it is I who must take care of Aubrey. He has not the spirit of a mouse."

"Yes, child; thou hast the greater courage, as should be, seeing that when you two are wed, thine will be the larger inheritance."

"And when is that to come to pass?" asked Ermentrude, gravely.

"When thou art grown to womanhood, I reckon, in a year or so, or maybe sooner," responded the uncle.

Ermentrude made him a profound reverence as he stood before her, and a naughty little mou as he turned his back. Then she hastened to her nurse and bade her take holiday.

"Thou shalt order Shon, the groom, to saddle my mare, and thou shalt ride behind him on my pillion to Castell Coch, and thou shalt take a note from me to Sir Tudor ap Griffith, and thou shalt await his answer," were the damsel's hasty orders.

"To Castell Coch! It is over twenty good miles!" cried Betto, uplifting her hands.

"Ah! but thou must do it, for thou knowest that I will never wed my cousin Aubrey, for he is a foolish fellow, and I love a man of mettle. Sir Tudor will order what is best, and thou must be quick. He told me what to do when uncle went from home, and thou art my only confidante."

Ermentrude threw her arms round her nurse, who had never thwarted her; and no sooner had the Squire departed, than Shon, groom, with Betto on a pillion at his back, was trotting off in the direction of Castell Coch.

"I have given her a holiday, and may be she will not be back to-night," explained Ermentrude.

"Thou takest too much upon thee, child," replied Dame Dorothy.

"I am no longer a child, ma'am," returned Ermentrude, offended.

"We will be grand when we are of age to wed," put in Aubrey.

Ermentrude passed a restless day. No Betto appeared. But she and Shon returned the following day and brought with them a missive from Sir Tudor Ap Griffith.

"Meet me to-morrow morning at seven of the clock beneath Llewellen's Oak," it ran, and Ermentrude was in a mighty flutter at the prospect of so soon seeing her lover.

"My bones ache with forty miles on horseback," pleaded Mistress Betto. "I can never be up and abroad so early."

"Then I go alone," replied the imperious maiden.

Little sleep visited her eyes that night, and she was astir with the song-birds at early dawn. She felt blithe as they, and would have sung as cheerily had she not feared to be heard. She aroused her nurse, who, despite her stiffened limbs, arose and did her bidding.

Long ere the big clock struck seven, they were away to the woods.

Never before was such a bright May morning. Ermentrude danced through blue bells and hyacinths and anemones—by hawthorn and cherry-blossom and fern-frond—beneath larch and oak and aspen. Earth was alight with dew drops through which the sunbeams pierced, and lights and shadows played at hide and seek in each forest glade. The birds warbled so lustily that the very sky and air seemed alive with melody, and all nature held jubilee to greet the glad child and her knightly lover.

"How slow thou art, Betto. We shall not reach the oak in time," cried Ermentrude.

"I am repenting of my ride of yesterday," answered the nurse.

"Fie, Betto ! But I see him ! And he wears his gayest suit to meet me," laughed Ermentrude, clapping her hands and running forwards. "Nay, but a stranger is with him," she added, pausing and frowning.

Beneath a gigantic oak stood a gallant youth, clad in the velvet and lace of the period. He advanced to meet her, and kneeling on the dewy sod, respectfully kissed her hand.

"I have brought the priest and the ring," he said.

"But what will my guardian say ?" asked Ermentrude, charmed, yet terrified.

"What matters it? Come quickly, and let us be married, or he will wed you to Aubrey."

Betto began to remonstrate, but the youth led the scarcely reluctant maiden to Llewellyn's Oak, where stood a priestly form in full canonicals, prayer book in hand.

"A fine church, truly, and a grand choir," laughed Ermentrude, as she set foot on the soft moss beneath the big oak, and heard the birds carolling in the huge branches.

What would she know of matrimony? She loved Sir Tudor with all her heart, and would obey him in all things ; so she stood with him, half amused, half frightened, before the priest, and the marriage service began. But she sobered as she listened, and would have stayed it half-way, had not her fiery bridegroom urged her on. Still, she smiled as he placed the ring on her finger, and wept a little when they knelt together to receive the benediction and exhortation of the facile priest. It was easier to get married in those days than these.

But scarcely was the solemn service ended when she suddenly jumped up, exclaiming, "The bell ! The bell !" and without further ceremony took to her heels, followed by her faithful nurse.

"By my troth it is a fine thing to be married," she exclaimed, as they reached the Plâs just as the big breakfast bell ceased to inform the world that it was eight o'clock.

"Where hast thou been, child ? Thy dress is disarranged and damp, thy hair dishevelled ?" said Aunt Dorothy.

"To the woods to hear the birds sing," she replied, holding down her head, abashed.

Meanwhile Sir Tudor and his recreant parson had mounted their

horses and ridden off, setting the bells of all the village churches a ringing as they went.

“For the marriage of Sir Tudor Ap Griffith with the beautiful Ermentrude of Castell Mawr,” he explained, as he scattered gold pieces among bell ringers and sextons.

And still the young bride thought within herself, “It is a fine thing to be married.”

But when her uncle returned at midday, she wondered if, after all, that golden circlet which she wore on her finger had quite transformed the world into paradise.

“What means this, niece?” he asked, severely. “The church bells are set agoing everywhere, and they tell me it is for the marriage of Sir Tudor Ap Griffith and my kinswoman, Ermentrude Traherne.”

“And so it is, uncle,” upspoke the bride. “We were married this morning.”

“Married, you young minx!” cried her uncle, seizing her by the arm and shaking her. “Who taught thee to tell lies to thy elders?”

“They are not lies, for see the ring,” she cried, bravely; believing that the sight of it would pacify her uncle.

But he stamped with rage, and dragged the dauntless maiden to her chamber, calling her many naughty names as they went, and threatening vengeance.

“Thou mayst imprison, but thou canst not unmarry me,” she said, when he loosened his grasp.

“I can and I will!” he cried, leaving her to her reflections, as he locked her into her solitary chamber. Then he sought the trembling Betto, and turned her unceremoniously out of his house. Truly he was in a furious passion. And scarcely less furious was his son, Aubrey. He loved his cousin a little, and her broad acres more. So he made common cause with his father, and they rode off to the notaries to see what could be done.

Ermentrude had plenty of time for reflection. She remained in solitary state a whole weary week. No Aunt Dorothy! No Betto! Only her uncle, followed at meal times by her aunt’s maid; for although in durance, she was not doomed to bread and water.

“Thou shalt be free so soon as thou promise to renounce him who has deceived thee into a sham marriage, and to take as thy affianced thy cousin Aubrey, to whom thou art betrothed.”

“I am not betrothed to Aubrey, and will not wed him,” cried Ermentrude, bravely.

“And I, as thy guardian, swear thou shalt not have that false Sir Tudor, who has wheedled thee forth to this sham bridal.”

“Heigh ho! I would I were of age,” sighed Ermentrude.

But her courage did not flinch. She beguiled the time as best she might, with her pets, her embroidery, and her few books, reading with unusual persistence those of devotion. Especially did she peruse

daily the marriage service, as set forth in the book of Common Prayer. This encouraged her to resistance, inasmuch as she believed she was lawfully wed. She even kept up her spirits by song, and her favourite ditty was the song of Lovelace to Althea.

" Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for a hermitage.
If I have freedom in my love,
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty."

She did not pause to reflect whether her mind was "innocent and quiet," but the verse consoled her.

On the seventh morning from that of her woodland bridal, she was looking out of her window in, it must be confessed, melancholy mood. From her apartment she could see a vast expanse of country, for her uncle's house stood high. Many times a day, if not quite all day long, she had gazed on a certain turnpike road that wound through wood and mead down below, and had repeated aloud, as if to some invisible friend, the words of Blue Beard's imprisoned wife: "Sister Ann, Sister Ann, do you see anybody coming?" But nobody had appeared save her cousin Aubrey. He managed to be always in sight; but she took no heed of his signals and vagaries.

On this seventh morning, however, she perceived a troop of twenty horsemen galloping furiously. In front was one who led by the bridle a milk-white steed, which was riderless.

"It is! It must be!" she cried, breathlessly, gazing until the cavalcade was out of sight.

Then she was conscious of a strange commotion in and without the house. She did not know that her uncle kept all his servants ready armed, or that he and Aubrey were also armed. But the twenty horsemen suddenly reappeared, tearing up the drive. She perceived that the white horse bore a lady's saddle, and that he who led the men was Sir Tudor Ap Griffith. Instantly she waved a white scarf towards him, and he kissed his hand in return.

"What will be next?" she ejaculated.

What happened next she could not see; but it was highly melodramatic. The twenty horsemen were met at the threshold of the Squire's door by twelve armed retainers. But Sir Tudor was worth them all. Jumping from his horse, he seized on the malicious uncle, presented a pistol at his throat, and exclaimed, "My bride, or your life!" Such conduct, and the sight of the nineteen followers, cowed the domestics, and caused Aubrey to run away. Ermentrude was right. He was but a milksop indeed! Moreover, her uncle was compelled to deliver up the key. Betto unexpectedly appeared and led the gallant spouse to his imprisoned bride. The nurse, it had been,

who, being ignominiously expelled, had managed to communicate with Sir Tudor, and thus been the means of the present adventure.

"I knew you would come," cried Ermentrude, clapping her hands as Sir Tudor entered.

But it was not into his arms she threw herself, but into those of her faithful nurse, from whom she had never before been separated. Sir Tudor, however, soon enfolded her in his, with the words, "My wife! my dear wife!" and carried her off triumphantly.

"Declare our marriage, parson," he added, as he hastened down the great staircase, followed by Betto.

A smooth-faced priest, one of the furious riders, advanced towards the discomfited Squire, and announced that he had married them by "book and bell," under the greenwood tree.

"Poltroons! robbers! villains all! cried the Squire. "Aubrey, come, assert thyself!" But Aubrey was nowhere to be seen.

"Good-bye, uncle; good-bye, Aunt Dorothy. Thou wilt come after us, Betto," cried Ermentrude, when she was seated by her bridegroom on the white palfrey.

And so, as the story goes, "They loved and they rode away."



FROM THE ITALIAN OF PLUTARCH,
ON HIS LOST LOVE.

THE breeze refreshing, and the fragrance sweet,
And flowering beauty of the laurel's shade,
My guiding star, and wearied life's retreat,
Earth's devastating death in dust hath laid.

As Phœbus darkened by his sister's veil,
So doth all kindly light my soul forsake;
And death as death's sole antidote I hail,
Such gloomy thoughts doth love within me wake.

One short, sweet slumber, lady, thou hast slept,
Then woke for ever 'mid those spirits blest;
Who, in the great Creator's bosom wrapt,
Enjoy their long-sought, everlasting rest.

But, oh, if yet my humble rhyme have worth,
To win a place upon the scroll of fame,
'Mid those whose echoes ne'er are lost on earth,
Perpetual glory shall attend thy name.

ALICE KING.

THE MAN FROM C—.

“SCOTS-MIN ! Edinburry Courant ! Glasgy Herald !”

Truly the land o’ cakes is reached at last, as these melodious cries inform us. We stretched ourselves after the stiffening process of a night journey, enlivened by one brief and dazzling break when we were sleepiest ; a ten minutes’ respite at a station where wide-awake young ladies preside over cups of coffee and other mixtures less approved by the Blue Ribbon Army, in brilliant gas-light ; and we drowsily swallow something, regarding these Hebes of the night as if they had been performing in one of the Christmas pantomimes of our youthful days, where even the brightest fairy became indistinct through the merciful mist of sleep.

Tickets were an unremembered evil as we rolled into the station at Edinburgh, for the terrific responsibility of those bits of pasteboard had been taken off our minds some thirty miles away, and we were free to land with our traps, and partake of an “Express” breakfast at two shillings and sixpence.

I was hailed by a cordial Scotch voice when half way through my meal.

“E-h, now, this is a good sight, Goring ! You’re going further North, of course ?”

“Yes, presently. I’m only taking a pleasure ramble.”

“Then don’t spoil it by sticking in Edinburgh, for the heat is unbearable, and our American cousins have filled the hotels, demoralised the waiters by large tips, and are now busy buying pieces of hot woollen tartan, and imaginary heraldic devices in silver, as trophies to take home. Come on to Blankshire to-day.”

“Let a fellow breathe, Christie !” I pleaded.

“You can’t, if you stay here,” persisted the energetic Scotchman ; “and it’s only an hour or two more of misery, and you’ll find yourself in a snug inn beside a loch that it almost cools one to remember.”

“I’m not so very hot,” I ventured to remark, for the early morning air was fresh to a Londoner.

“You’re as obstinate as ever, I see,” said Christie, complacently.

My eyes were lifted in mild rebuke, for if during all my life I ever met a pig-headed fellow at an argument, my once fellow-student was the man. I was not sufficiently refreshed to argue with him then, however, so acquiesced in all his arrangements, and soon we were on our way to the inn and loch so appreciated by my friend.

A day or two convinced me that we had hit upon a pleasant spot ; and the landlady of the inn, an active industrious body, looked after our bodily comfort to admiration. Christie had several times visited the inn, and agreed with all I could say in its praise.

"It wasn't half as snug, though, until she came!" he said one day. "The landlord wasn't much of a manager. He only married a few years ago, and a queer story it made, that wedding."

Of course I asked for the story, there being nothing else to do till the hissing noise at the kitchen fire should result in the serving of our dinner.

"Well, Donald was a confirmed bachelor, and might have been one now, but for the industrious perseverance of an old friend of his own, whom we will call the man from C—. He never met Donald without pointing out how much better the inn would thrive if he gave it a mistress. Donald was a very silent man, and a good listener, but in reply to the invariable remark of the man from C— 'E-h, mon, ye should marry!' Donald never said more than a careless 'Ou-aye.'

"At last, however, the stone began to show signs of being worn away with perpetual dropping, and Donald cautiously relented.

"'If I'm to get married, then, ye'll just hae to find a wife for me!'

"'Ah, noo! That I'll do, and gladly!' said the man from C—.

"A few weeks later he returned from a place some twenty miles away, and hailed Donald with a zeal that couldn't have been warmer if he had been securing a partner for himself.

"'Noo, Donald, I've just found the very wummin for ye!' Donald puffed silently at his pipe, and looked stolidly across the loch in front here.

"'Ye'll come over and see her on Thursday. I'm gaein' mysel' that day.'

"'Na,' said Donald in a determined voice, 'I'll no come to see her! but ye can ask her if she'll marry me.'

"The man from C— was aghast, and tried in vain to alter Donald's resolution; the landlord knew his own mind, and continued. 'Ye'll ask her if she'll hae me, and if she says yes ye'll just ask her when, and when it's sattled I'll go and get married, and that's a' aboot it.'

"Accordingly the devoted friend procured the bride's consent, and on the day appointed Donald went over, and the ceremony proceeded. When it was ended, he turned to the man from C—, who had presided like a benevolent fairy at the scene, and said, 'I dunna like the wummin at a'!'

"In horror the friend clutched his arm, and with a hushed and prolonged 'E—h!' endeavoured to smooth matters, the bride, let us hope, not hearing.

"'I'm sure she's a very nice wummin, Donald.'

"'I dunna like her,' said the relentless bridegroom.

"'It's no right o' ye to say sic things, Donald! Ye'll just gae awa' wi' your wife, noo—'

"'Then ye must come awa too!' said Donald, in a determined voice; and the man from C— met his required fate."

"Good heavens ! said I, as the story ended, "aren't they miserable?"

"Not a bit. She manages Donald, and the house ; keeps tipsy customers in bounds and good order, and always has the house full. It's better than a love-match, I assure you ; and the man from C— congratulates himself and Donald every time they meet."

Our dinner was served piping hot by the heroine of the tale, and was so good, I began to think of asking the man from C— to find a wife for me too.

A few days later my friend Christie had occasion to call at a tiny stone-built cottage, just a "but and a ben," he explained to me, to ask an old woman there for a fishing net she had in hand for him. I accompanied him, and the door was opened to us by a very frail-looking little woman, some seventy years of age. She looked much disturbed in her mind, and when Jack Christie asked if his net was done, she shook her head.

"Indeed, Mr. Christie, I'm fashed so with them in there," pointing to a small locked door which communicated with another little house, as much like her own as irregular old cottages ever are, "I canna get my wark done."

"What ! aren't they at peace yet, Granny ?"

"Na, nor ever will be in this world," said the old woman solemnly. "And it's hard telling what may happen after ; but," added she, with a firm and vicious snap of her old mouth, "he'll gae to the place appointed for him !"

What this place was so plainly revealed itself to the hearers that I turned away to hide a smile at this refined way of putting it.

"Well, let me have the net as soon as you can, Granny. I'll be passing by again soon."

When we were walking on again, Christie said :

"That's an old character ! Her daughter's matrimonial bickers and 'dustings,' as she calls them, are the plague of her life. They live in the next cottage, and when there's a row they try to get through to her by that small door which she keeps religiously locked since some events which happened a few months ago."

"I say, Christie, you're a sort of private 'Matrimonial News !' Where do you get your stories ?"

"I have an expression of much solid wisdom, as you have no doubt observed, and it invites confidence. I must tell you, however, the tale of Bob and Bet, as I had it from Bet's mother. These two fools made a love-match, and by the time their first child was four months old they 'dusted' so continually that the situation brought about a crisis. Bob is a bricklayer, and his daily return from work was greeted by not only words but blows, from his termagant wife. In vain he urged her to leave him, and let him get someone to mind the child—in vain he endeavoured to persuade her to peace. At last he said :

"Weel, gang yer ain gait, and I'll gae mine."

“The fury watched him as he put together his clothes and tied them in a bundle, sneering at him all the time. When he had his bundle safe in one hand, he picked up the four months’ old baby in the other, and marched forth. Then was Bet’s turn to quake! She could not get the child, for the big man held it high, and went away to his mother, a mile off. Bet burst into her mother’s cottage, in screaming grief.

“‘He’s gane, mither, he’s gane, and I maun just get awa to Margaret Dewar’s and bide the nicht.’

“Now Margaret Dewar was the scandal-lover and mischief-maker of the place, and old Granny was wiser than some mothers.

“‘Ye’ll do nothing of the kind, Bet! Ye’ll just bide in yer ain house, and keep still.’

“‘But my bairn, my bairn! I canna live without my bairn.’

“‘Bide ye still, Bet Tulloch! Ye’ll sune hae yer bairn again!’ said her mother, with the shrewdest wisdom and contempt.

“Next morning Bob’s mother arrived humbly at Granny’s door carrying the baby, who had screamed unmercifully all night, and reduced its father to ashes in his humiliating ignorance of how to manage it! Bob loafed about for a day or two, and then came home to be jeered at the more. Now they fight equally, and his blows to Bet make Granny think him a brute.”

“That’s why she has settled his ‘appointed place’ for him,” said I.

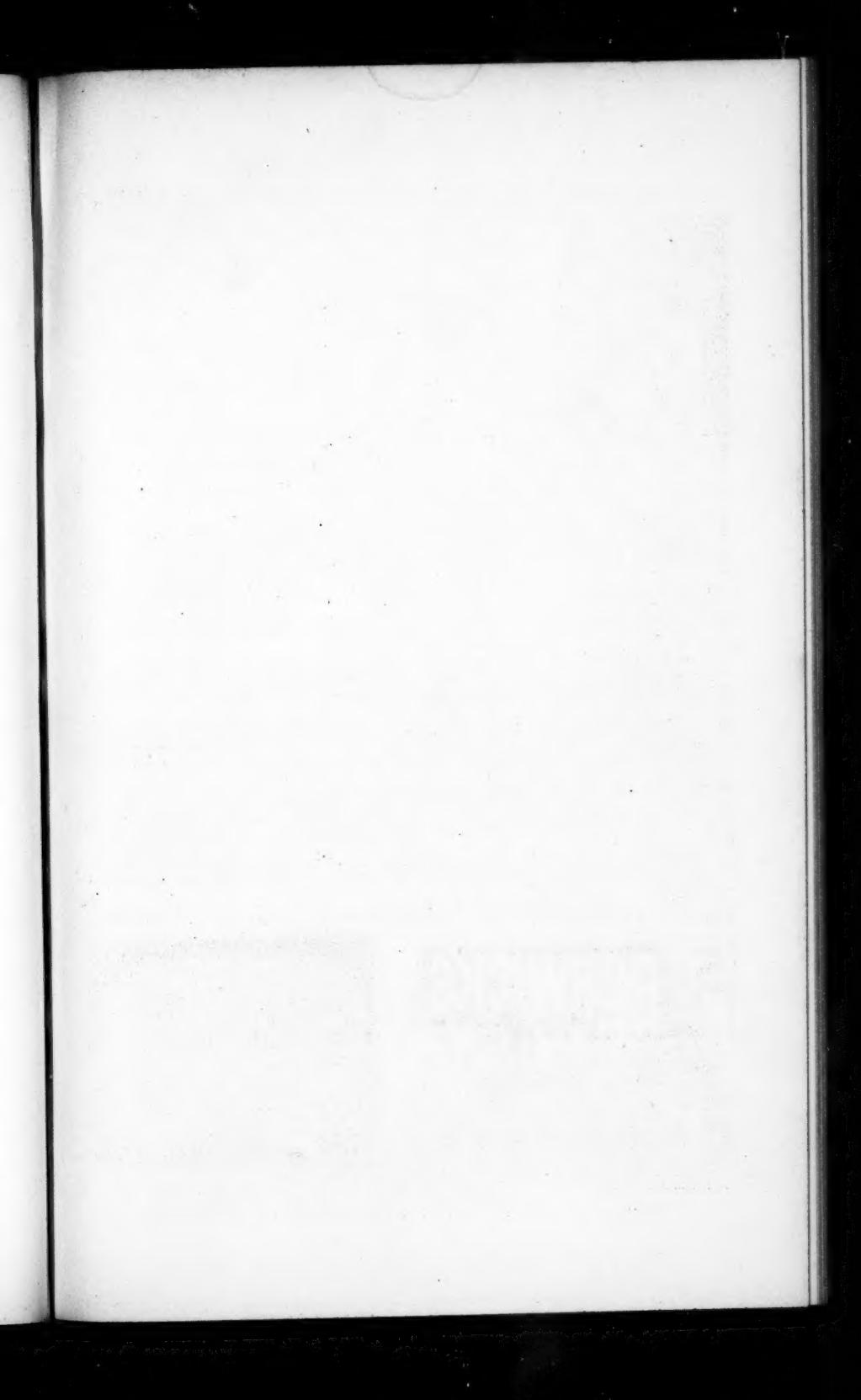
“Yes, and that is how so many romantic marriages end,” observed Christie, with a solemn nod.

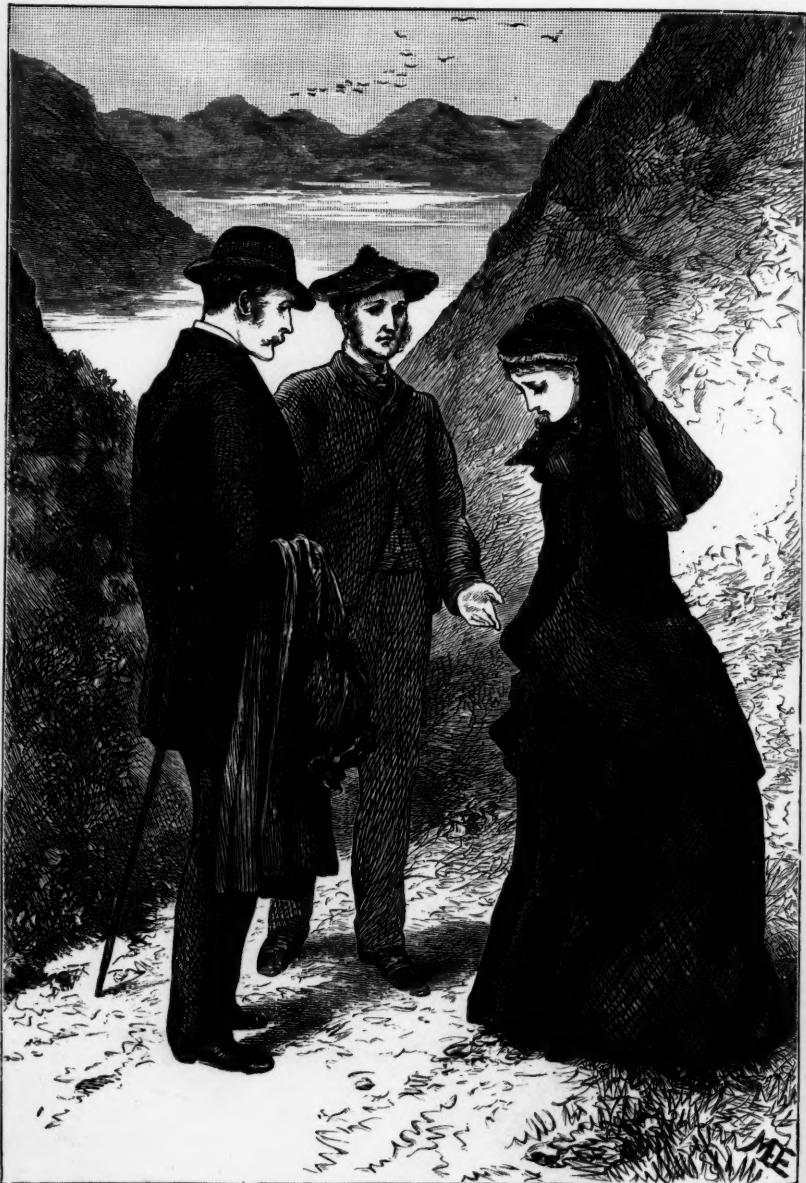
“Upon my word, it seems a pity that some wise and astute agent like the ‘Man from C—,’ who knows people’s wants better than they do themselves, should not be appointed in every parish in Scotland,” remarked I. “He’s a valuable fellow, and I should like to make his acquaintance.”

“There’s one other thing better,” said Jack Christie, shrewdly: “and that is not to marry at all.”

MINNIE DOUGLAS.







M. ELLEN STAPLES.

R. AND E. TAYLOR.

"SHE IS AT PEACE," SAID THE HIGHLANDER, SOLEMNLY,